MANCHESTER CITY: *The verdict that could shake football to its foundations*

Exclusive Henry Winter, Keir Radnedge and Jonathan Wilson columns

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At times it felt like the Manchester City case would go on forever, never settled, never resolved. Their guilty verdict – which the club have lodged an appeal against – is the kind of story that demands the attention of all our frontline columnists; Henry Winter asks what is next for the players, Keir Radnedge examines the fallout, and Jonathan Wilson argues that Pep Guardiola's legacy has been damaged.

Lionel Messi's international career with Argentina also felt like it might go on forever, but in October it came to a definitive end. Joel Richards was in Buenos Aires for the end of an era.

Elsewhere, we examine the rise of Greece, shine the spotlight on Irish goal-getter Troy Parrott, and go inside the homecoming of Colombia icon James Rodriguez.

Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

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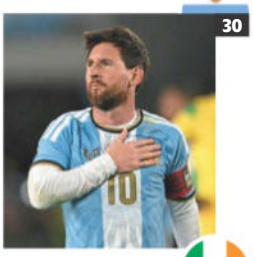

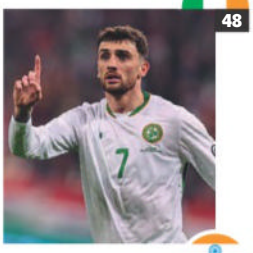

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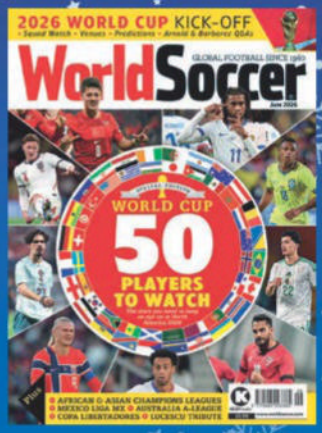

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Henry WINTER
THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

What now for City's stars?

Sticking together... which of Manchester City's superstars will stay if the club's appeal fails?

If the worse befalls Manchester City, and their appeal against the guilty verdicts for financial breaches fails, they could be facing a deserved spell in exile outside the Premier League. Will their players stay on or immediately be on to their agents? History shows dark clouds in such situations but also a ray of hope.

When Juventus were relegated to Serie B following the *Calciopoli* referee-fixing scandal of 2006, the Italian giants immediately haemorrhaged playing talent. Fabio Cannavaro, fresh from lifting the World Cup with Italy, and Brazilian midfielder Emerson headed with the coach Fabio Capello to Real Madrid. Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Patrick Vieira drove 90 miles east along the A4 to Internazionale. Lilian Thuram and Gianluca Zambrotta flew off to Barcelona, and Adrian Mutu joined Fiorentina.

The Old Lady wasn't completely deserted. Some big stars stayed, loyally turning up for duty in Serie B. In Juve's first game, before a packed crowd at Rimini, Gianluigi Buffon and Alessandro Del Piero started. The duo's previous outing had been in the World Cup final in Berlin. Giorgio Chiellini and Pavel Nedved also started in that game on the Adriatic. Mauro Camoranesi came on. David Trezeguet also featured that season.

Juventus retained important talent and, living up to their name, were also able to promote youth, two untried homegrown 20-year-olds, amongst others. The "Little Prince" midfielder Claudio Marchisio went on to play 389 times for Juventus. The forward Sebastian Giovinco, who made his debut later in that Serie B season, ended up representing the club 132 times across six seasons.

And this is the ray of hope. City will hope to keep their main stars, but even if they do lose some they have a talented academy to draw on. Calamity could breed opportunity. Phil Foden, Nico O'Reilly and Rico Lewis are homegrown, are already senior internationals and have a camaraderie and loyalty to the club that will prove important.

In October, I went to Stoke to watch England Under-21s qualify for next summer's European Championship finals with a 0-0 draw against Slovakia. The best player on view was Max Alleyne, the stylish centre-back on loan from City at Burnley. Another 21-year-old, Lewis, already familiar with first-team action, did well at left-back. Divin Mubama, the 21-year-old forward on loan at Southampton, came on. Divine Mukasa, the 19-year-old midfielder on loan at West Ham, watched on.

City have so much talent. Jeremy Monga was brought in from Leicester City for £10 million and loaned out to Swansea City. The winger is only 17.

The 19-year-old attacking midfielder, Sverre Nypan, has already played for Norway. Cavan Sullivan, the exciting 17-year-old USMNT midfielder, has a clause in his Philadelphia Union deal that he goes to City at 18.

Rival academies may eye up City's starlets and offer some a way out if desired. But there may be a brotherhood amongst the kids that brings some more defiance and energy to the first team.

Any sanction complicates recruitment, not least if there is a transfer ban. But history shows that loyalty can be detected amidst such distress.

One of the many reasons Glenn Hoddle is so loved at Tottenham Hotspur is that he stayed despite relegation in 1976. Hoddle helped them back up. Jarrod Bowen is adored at West Ham because of his goals and his leadership – plus he's married to Cockney heartthrob Dani Dyer – but also because he refused to jump ship when the club hit the relegation rocks in 2026. Michael Carrick stayed on for a season with West Ham back in 2003. In 2011, Scott Parker did leave for Spurs after four games in the Championship with the Hammers. Every player is different.

City players are still absorbing the news and waiting to see whether the club is successful in its appeal. There is no suggestion that City players had any inkling of any of the malpractices outlined in the report issued by the Independent Commission. Any wrongdoing is also vehemently denied by the club, hence the appeal. Rodri was asked about it when Spain played England last month and categorically supported City.

City may not suffer the talent drain of Juventus, although some will inevitably consider their future if the appeal fails. But could they find similar wages elsewhere? It's reported they don't have relegation clauses. Some have very long contracts anyway; Erling Haaland's deal, for instance, runs until 2034.

As well as the flow of talent from the academy, City strengthened their squad in the summer, bringing in upgrades on the outgoing stars. They refreshed the squad from a talent and age perspective. Thirty-somethings like Bernardo Silva, John Stones, Rodri, Manuel Akanji and Nathan Ake were politely moved on.

City rebuilt their midfield with the signings of Elliot Anderson, Ayyoub Bouaddi and Enzo Fernandez for £330m. Tijjani Reijnders, 28, was sold to Al Qadisah for £52m. City received a similar fee from Newcastle United for Nico Gonzalez. Omar Marmoush (loaned to Tottenham Hotspur) and Savio (£75m to Spurs) weren't starting. Iliman Ndiaye and Allan arrived to offer options wide. In goal, James Trafford wasn't starting, was prized by others and City received £40m from Leeds United, so his move made sense for all parties.

City have constructed their squad with typical meticulous planning. Only four players – Marcus Bettinelli, Mateo Kovacic, Matheus Nunes and Geronimo Rulli – have contracts that expire in or before summer 2028. The only question is: what division will they be playing in?

City will hope to keep their main stars, but even if they do lose some they have a talented academy to draw on

Juventus legend ...Gianluigi Buffon stuck with Juve in the second tier

Manchester City timeline

- **September 2008**
  Abu Dhabi United Group (ADUG) agrees a £200 million takeover of Manchester City.
- **May 2012**
  City win their first Premier League title.
- **August 2013**
  The City Football Group (CFG) is founded, with New York City FC formed to join Manchester City in the multi-club ownership group.
- **May 2014**
  City accept a £49m fine – £32m suspended – from UEFA after recording combined losses of £148.6m in the 2011-12 and 2012-13 seasons.
- **February 2016**
  City announce that Pep Guardiola will take charge of the club for the 2016-17 season.
- **March 2019**
  UEFA launches an investigation into City's finances after German magazine *Der Spiegel* reports that their owners had broken FFP regulations.
- **February 2020**
  UEFA ban City from European club competitions for two seasons and fine the club £25m after they are found to have broken UEFA's FFP rules.
- **July 2020**
  The Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) concludes that City's breaches were "time-barred." Their UEFA ban is lifted and their fine reduced.
- **February 2023**
  The Premier League lists the 115 charges against City. They include: 54x breaches of failing to provide accurate and up-to-date financial information, 14x breaches of failing to provide accurate player and manager compensation reports, 5x breaches of failing to comply with UEFA regulations, including FFP, 7x breaches of Premier League Profitability and Sustainability Rules (PSR), and 35x breaches of failing to co-operate with Premier League investigations.
- **September 2024**
  The hearing into the Premier League's charges against City begins.
- **September 2026**
  The Premier League announces that City have been found "guilty of all charges related to serious breaches of the Premier League's financial rules over a nine-season period, and the majority of charges in relation to its failure to co-operate with the League's investigation."
- **October 2026**
  Manchester City confirm that they will appeal against the guilty verdict, insisting that the ruling contained "clear material errors, of law, principle and fact and is unsafe."

Keir RADNEDGE
THE INSIDER

The end of the beginning of the Manchester City saga

City's guilty verdict is only another chapter in a story that will continue to rumble on

Etihad Campus... City's owners have invested hugely into Manchester

The latest twist in the "Financial Unfair Play" scandal swirling around Manchester City is not the beginning of the end of the greatest governance scandal in English football history; it is merely the end of the beginning.

City have carried on winning relentlessly despite the cloud hanging over the club since December 2018, eight long years ago. This was when the Premier League launched its initial investigation into the veracity of documents unearthed by the Portuguese hacker/whistleblower Rui Pinto and published by *Der Spiegel*.

The inquiry lasted four years before City were charged with 115 financial breaches in February 2023. A further three and a half years were needed to produce guilty verdicts on all but one charge. No surprise the excited speculation which exploded.

Firstly, the initial outcome of the deliberations of the independent three-man tribunal was leaked, which irritated the Premier League. Some other club officials, under conditions of confidentiality, had supposedly seen the conclusions. Secondly, the leak cast a wave of uncertainty over the credibility of the ongoing process, such as whether sanctions would be revealed before or after City had registered their inevitable appeal.

Assuming the appeal demands a similar level of scrutiny to the inquiry, then finality will not be achieved this year or even this season. A notional fall back to a claim of *force majeure* or even natural justice could weigh on the timescale, whatever may be written in the rules. In any case, City, under new manager Enzo Maresca, remain free to charge ahead around the top of the Premier League and maintain their usual pursuit of not only the ultimate domestic prize but the UEFA Champions League, FA Cup and League Cup.

As for sanctions, a financial penalty would mean nothing to City's owners from Abu Dhabi, a state whose sovereign wealth outflanks even its oil revenues. Hence a sporting sanction would be more painful, possibly enough points to push City down one or two or three tiers. Some sanguine supporters have pointed out that this would not affect their loyalty; after all, City were down in the third tier as comparatively recently as 1998-99.

Chairman Khaldoon Al Mubarak told fans as much in an open letter. He wrote: "Our confidence and intent in proving the club's innocence is just as strong as when this began. We have faced challenges together before and have prevailed." That comment referred to City's victory over UEFA at the Court of Arbitration for Sport in 2020. City were cleared then on the technicality of charges brought out of time.

Khaldoon's letter also appeared to suggest that the club might

challenge the impartiality of the tribunal members. His defiance was echoed by chief executive Ferran Soriano, addressing a board meeting of European Football Clubs (formerly the ECA). City have previous in terms of contesting all charges and sanctions. Khaldoon's comments recalled his remarks during the FFP row with UEFA that he would rather spend £30 million on the 50 best lawyers in the world to sue the European federation for the next ten years than accept formal sanctions.

The City case was widely compared with Everton's eight-point deduction in 2023-24 for breaching the Premier League's profitability and sustainability rules. However, a more appropriate comparison might be drawn with the Leeds City scandal of 1919 when Herbert Chapman was manager.

During the First World War, official competition was suspended with only regional "wartime matches" permitted. Leeds City attracted players for these matches with rule-busting under-the-counter payments. They were almost certainly not the only club evading the rules but were the only one shopped, by a disaffected player named Charlie Copeland. The Football League demanded answers but Leeds City refused to cooperate. They were expelled from the league and their players were auctioned off. As Leeds City were dissolved so Leeds United were founded, to be voted into the Football League in 1920.

Manchester City, of course, are in no danger of going bust but their case raised speculation about wider implications beyond football. These include the owners' commitment to the city of Manchester itself, the credibility of the worldwide 12-club City Football Group and even whether the fallout could affect political relations between the UK and the United Arab Emirates amid the current Middle East turbulence.

Prime Minister Andy Burnham said he would be "really concerned to lose them" when asked about the prospect of City's owners being forced to sell, with the former mayor of Greater Manchester adding: "They've been such a huge partner in the building of modern Manchester."

Indeed they have. Over the past 16 years the ownership group has invested more than £1 billion into transforming one of the UK's most deprived industrial suburbs. This has brought the development of the Etihad educational campus, an expansion of community infrastructure, local housing projects and commercial property investment. Local politicians fear that significant punishment could harm or even halt future development.

> "Our confidence and intent in proving the club's innocence is just as strong as when this began. We have faced challenges together before and have prevailed"
>
> Manchester City chairman Khaldoon Al Mubarak

As for the City Football Group, this is a 12-club ownership network stretching across five continents and including New York City FC, Girona, Melbourne City and Palermo (more on page 52). The overall strategy involves shared global sponsorship deals, intertwined scouting and transfer operations, and significant reliance on the power of Manchester City's commercial brand.

Heavy sanctions on the flagship club could spark a domino effect with an across-the-board withdrawal by multi-national sponsors and media operators. All this is in addition to the damage the City affair has inflicted on the integrity of the Premier League itself.

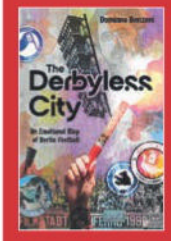
As for the politics, fears here may be overrated. Abu Dhabi is the effective capital of the seven-emirate UAE. UK-UAE ties rest on security, energy, finance and trade and both governments have strong reasons not to let a sporting dispute damage them. Abu Dhabi, reluctantly, could cope with a fine or points deduction.

Meanwhile, other questions will hover around the club and may never be answered to anyone's satisfaction. For instance, did the club spend so heavily (£458m) on new players this summer to get ahead of reputational damage; also, did the prospect of an imminent verdict play any role in Pep Guardiola's decision to step away a year early?

It seems the more City fans know, the more they may never know.

Defiant...Manchester City chairman Khaldoon Al Mubarak and the club's CEO Ferran Soriano

BOOKS THIS MONTH



THE DERBYLESS CITY
By Damiano Benzoni (Pitch Publishing, £14.99)

The Derbyless City dives into the hidden world of football in Berlin, exploring a city in perpetual flux and shaped by its fractured history. From the vast Olympiastadion to the more intimate terraces of the Alte Forsterei – weaving through pubs and grassroots pitches, and touching on big clubs like Union, Hertha and Dynamo through to the amateur scene – we discover a football landscape pulsating with history, identity, contradictions and community.

A FINE LINE
By Matthew Rhodes (Pitch Publishing, £19.99)

A Fine Line: How the Spireites (Almost) Reached the FA Cup Final is a nostalgic celebration of one of the most extraordinary underdog stories in FA Cup history. This book is brimming with memories from those who were there – Spireites players, supporters, sports journalists and one of the most iconic referees in the English game.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Pep's legacy is unavoidably tarnished

Pep Guardiola might be the finest coach of the 21st century, but the verdict on the charges against Manchester City leaves the perception of a record tainted

Pep Guardiola is an enormously successful coach. He has won three Champions Leagues, three La Liga titles, three Bundesliga titles and six Premier League titles. He has been the most important tactician of this century, so influential that there is a sense in which, at least until a year or two ago, almost every major side played in a notably "Guardiolista" style.

But in the wake of the publication in September of the Independent Commission's verdict on the Premier League charges against Manchester City, that status must inevitably come into question.

Of course, Guardiola remains a great mind. He took the precepts of Total Football he learned under Johan Cruyff, adapted them to the modern game and produced at Barcelona one of the most revolutionary teams the world has ever known. To see them in 2008-09 was to see a form of football that had never been played before. They pressed hard and, having regained the ball, simply did not give it back; this was possession football on an entirely new level. That impact can never be doubted, and nor can the genius that lay behind it.

Ex-Manchester City boss...Pep Guardiola

> How much easier to play incredible football with a deep squad, packed with great players, that has been put together using resources the club – according to the Independent Commission's findings – had no right to spend

The gripe that Guardiola could only play that way because they had the best players in the world seemed then a little mealy-mouthed. Nobody now can elevate a minor provincial club to become European champions; Guardiola was never going to get, say, Numancia playing like that. Yes, he had inherited in Lionel Messi one of the best players ever to play the game, and had the financial might of a European giant behind him at a time when they were wealthy enough that errors like the signing of Zlatan Ibrahimovic didn't really hurt them. But, equally, half of that team had come through *La Masia*, two of them, Sergio Busquets and Pedro, elevated by Guardiola himself.

The football Guardiola's Bayern Munich played was exceptional, but there the claim he was playing rich-man's football had rather more credence. Bayern are so financially dominant over every other German club that not to win the league is regarded as a disaster; that they didn't add a European title to the three Bundesliga crowns they won with extravagant points tallies, while not a failure as such, did cast a slight shadow over his tenure.

Manchester City were a club built for Guardiola. Ferran Soriano and Txiki Begiristain were already in place as CEO and sporting director. An academy had been set up as Guardiola wanted it. There had been a move to begin to assemble a squad that could play his style of football.

Guardiola arrived in 2016, so only his first two seasons fall within the period that has been investigated, but it would be absurd to pretend

Six-time Premier League champion... Guardiola with his first title in 2018

that City after 2018 did not benefit from the breaches that are judged to have taken place in the previous nine seasons.

Guardiola's sides were frequently brilliant. They racked up a record 100 points in 2017-18. They got 98 points in 2018-19. They won the treble in 2022-23. They have had great players, from Erling Haaland to Fernandinho, Sergio Aguero to Rodri, Kevin De Bruyne to Vincent Kompany. They played some incredible football. But how much easier to play incredible football with a deep squad, packed with great players, that has been put together using resources the club – according to the Independent Commission's findings – had no right to spend. And that, unavoidably, will taint Guardiola's legacy. Of course, City could be successful in their appeal and avoid the worst, or perhaps any, sanctions. But that will not change the way that both they and Guardiola are perceived.

Pep might argue that he is another victim, his life achievements tarnished by arrangements of which he had no knowledge, although it would be easier to accept that had he not expressed blanket support for his former employers straight after the verdict was revealed.

"I am," he addressed supporters in a statement, "always have been, always will, be behind my club, my owner, my chairman, Ferran [Soriano], the players, staff, [the manager] Enzo [Maresca] and you, our unique supporters. Let me be clear: we will get through this together."

He had, of course, previously said that he had told the Manchester City board: "If you lie to me, the day after I am not here. I will be out and I will not be your friend any more." If he has read the verdict and does not at least begin to doubt City's innocence, then he is somebody of remarkable faith. Perhaps that's understandable: the last Amazon documentary showed just how much he had sacrificed for the club; to believe that may be worthless, that your achievements, the last ten years of your career, could end up being regarded as a taint on the game, would be a difficult lesson to stomach.

Julian HALL

(New York Red Bulls & USA)

In September and October, a new era began for Mauricio Pochettino and the US national team as the coach handed out debuts to no fewer than eight teenagers, and four others aged 21 and under, across four friendlies.

Stealing the show was Hall, an 18-year-old forward who has already played more than 50 MLS games for hometown club New York Red Bulls. Coming off the bench against Peru for his first taste of international football, the teenager scored one goal and assisted another, then was on target again against Chile and Mexico, taking his tally to three goals in his first three games.

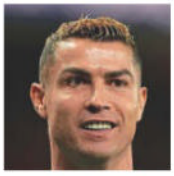
Pochettino declared himself "so proud" of his young debutants, including Manchester City-bound midfielder Cavan Sullivan, who made his US bow just two days before his 17th birthday and then became the nation's youngest-ever scorer a week later. Dortmund midfielder Mathis Albert, 17, and Orlando City's Justin Ellis, 19, also scored their first international goals.

Noahkai BANKS
(Augsburg & Germany)
It hasn't all been good news for the US on the youth front though; Hawaii-born defender Banks accepted a call-up by Germany's U21s.

Isaac KONDE
(Manchester United & England)
In welcome news for the Red Devils following the highly speculated exit of teenage prodigy JJ Gabriel, United signed hugely promising winger Konde from Liverpool's academy.

Amin CHIAKHA
(Rosenborg & Algeria)
Rosenborg have flown up the Norwegian top flight, rising from second-bottom to fifth, thanks almost entirely to their young striker. The 20-year-old Algeria international scored 11 goals in ten games to take his team from relegation candidates to European contenders.

Floyd SAMBA
(Manchester City & Germany)
In the latest case of a former Premier League player's son turning pro, Samba, whose father Christopher played for Blackburn Rovers, QPR and Aston Villa, netted twice against Norwich City in a League Cup tie. Floyd's brother Tyrone is also in City's academy.



"I can promise all my fans, naturally and especially all the Portuguese people, that we will have one or more farewell matches; there will be time for that"

In a 1,700-word statement, Cristiano Ronaldo explains his exit from the Portugal camp and promises he will play one more game

The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month...

2
Clubs that Lionel Messi has invested in after purchasing Spanish second-tier side CD Eldense. Earlier this year, the Argentine bought Catalan club Cornella in the fifth division.

19
Goalkeepers with 100 or more Premier League clean sheets after Everton's Jordan Pickford became the latest shot-stopper to pass the milestone.

2032
Year that Luis de la Fuente's contract as Spain's head coach runs to after the World Cup-winning manager penned a new deal until Euro 2032.

1
Players that have scored over 100 goals for Inter Miami after Lionel Messi passed the milestone in his 115th game for the MLS club.

98
Games that it took for Bayern Munich talisman Harry Kane to score 100 Bundesliga goals, becoming the quickest-ever player to reach the tally.

Record-breaker... Kane celebrates scoring against Union Berlin

2
European clubs owned by Qatar Sports Investment after they added Belgian side KAS Eupen to Paris Saint-Germain. QSI also own a minority stake in SC Braga.

Cobblers investor ...Alexandre Pato at Northampton's Sixfields Stadium

70%
Stake in League Two side Northampton Town that has been purchased by a consortium led by former Brazil, Milan and Chelsea forward Alexandre Pato.

10
Years since a second-tier team won a European group/league phase match, until Portuguese side Torreense beat Lillestrom in the Europa League.

38
Years and 274 days, the age of Tim Ream when he became the United States' oldest World Cup player in July. In September, the ex-Fulham defender announced his international retirement.

€1
Fee paid by US investment fund Park Bench to purchase Girondins de Bordeaux, ending the disastrous ownership of Gerard Lopez that saw the club drop down to the sixth tier of French football.

3
Serie A head coaches that were sacked before the end of September. Fabio Grosso was replaced by Paolo Vanoli at Fiorentina, Domenico Tedesco was axed for Raffaele Palladino by Bologna, and Parma sacked Carlos Cuesta and hired Alberto Gilardino.

16
Years and 363 days, the age of midfielder Cavan Sullivan when he made his debut for the United States in September, becoming the country's youngest player since Freddy Adu. Just days later, he became the nation's record goalscorer after netting v Mexico aged 17 years and five days.

Teenage talent...US starlet Cavan Sullivan

$370m
Money spent on transfer fees by MLS clubs in 2026, a new record for the league, which also generated $218m in player sales, another record.

1
Years that Thomas Muller has added to his deal at Vancouver Whitecaps, keeping him in MLS until the summer of 2027.

28
Ghana caps won by Athletic Club forward Inaki Williams, who announced his international retirement in September.

60
Senegal caps won by ex-Chelsea goalkeeper Edouard Mendy, who also retired from international duty.

6
Games that Dino Toppmoller was in charge of Lens before exiting the Ligue 1 strugglers, with his assistant Yannick Cahuzac stepping up to replace him.

14
Italian venues that submitted bids to host games at Euro 2032, with co-hosts Turkey proposing ten venues. Each country will choose five each for the finals.

152
International caps won by Bosnia & Herzegovina striker Edin Dzeko, who bowed out of international football in October as his nation's record appearance maker and top scorer (73 goals).

7
Goals Croatia conceded at home to England in their Nations League clash. The 7-0 loss is the heaviest defeat in the country's history.

Win an unforgettable 2027 Lyon & Provence river voyage for two, with Viking

Win an unforgettable 2027 *Lyon & Provence* river voyage with Viking, and experience the beauty, culture and charm of southern France from the comfort of an award-winning Viking Longship. This journey offers the perfect opportunity to slow down, soak up the scenery and discover some of France's most captivating destinations.

Sailing along the Rhône River, you'll discover the historic city of Lyon, famous for its gastronomy and UNESCO-listed Old Town, as well as charming Provençal towns such as Avignon, Arles, and Viviers. Along the way, enjoy stunning scenery, fascinating local heritage, and opportunities to experience the flavours, art, and traditions that make this region so unique.

The prize includes flights, accommodation in your elegant stateroom, meals, selected beverages with lunch and dinner, and a range of included shore excursions. You will also enjoy onboard enrichment talks, complimentary Wi-Fi, and access to Viking's beautifully designed public spaces and amenities.

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To enter this amazing competition, scan the QR Code.
Full T&Cs are available on entry.
Entry is free. Open to residents of the UK aged 21+

VIKING

"I love playing for the national team, but ultimately I owe everything to Real Madrid and I feel that I am the best Courtois here...I'll make myself available again for the European Championship qualifiers"

Belgium goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois tells radio station *Onda Cero* why he ruled himself out of the UEFA Nations League

12 MOVES *you might have missed...*

TRANSFERS ★ LOANS ★ SACKINGS ★ HIRINGS ★ SWITCHES ★ RETIREMENTS

Javier AGUIRRE

With **Valencia** lying in 19th spot in La Liga, they turned to the former Mexico manager to replace Carlos Corberan. It is the 67-year-old's seventh Spanish club.

Philippe COUTINHO

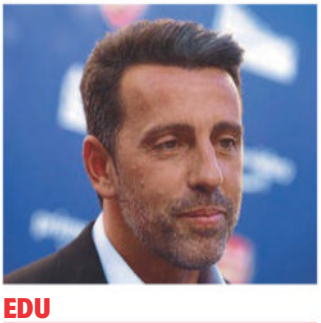
Seven months after leaving Vasco da Gama, the former Liverpool and Barcelona playmaker found a club, reuniting with his ex-Brazil team-mate Neymar at **Santos**.

Yves BISSOUMA

Having been released by Tottenham Hotspur at the end of last season, the 30-year-old Mali midfielder joined Dutch giants **Ajax** as a free agent on a one-year deal.

Chris SMALLING

After two years with Saudi Arabian club Al Fayha, the 36-year-old former Manchester United, Roma and England defender returned to European football to join **Porto**.



EDU

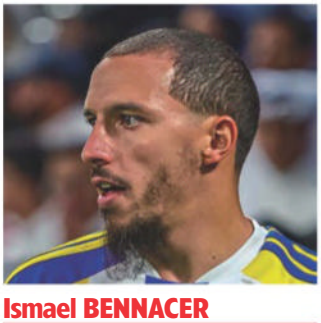
The Brazilian left as global sporting director at Evangelos Marinakis' clubs (Nottingham Forest, Olympiacos and Rio Ave) to join the board of Bulgarian champions **Levski Sofia**.

Sofiane BOUFAL

In one of the biggest signings in the history of the Libyan top flight, the former Southampton, Le Havre and Morocco winger, 33, joined Tripoli-based side **Al Ittihad**.

Hakim ZIYECH

Another member of Morocco's 2022 World Cup squad, Ziyech departed Wydad Casablanca less than a year after joining them and signed for Brazilian side **Botafogo**.



Ismael BENNACER

The former Milan midfielder, who was released in the summer, joined Qatari side **Al Gharafa**. Another ex-Serie A midfielder, Marcelo Brozovic, also moved to Qatar, joining Al Sadd.

Bryan RUIZ

Costa Rica's third-most capped star took interim charge of the national team following Fernando Batista's brief tenure. His first move was to re-call former team-mate Keylor Navas.

Carlos QUEIROZ

The veteran coach quit **Ghana** for the second time this year. Queiroz, 73, was persuaded to return after the World Cup, but left after two AFCON 2027 qualifying defeats.

David ALABA

Austria's captain joined a new club after being released by Real Madrid at the end of last season, moving to Serie A side **Udinese** on a deal until the end of the season.

Marcus EDWARDS

The Burnley winger, 27, who won 49 caps at youth level for England, opted to play for **Cyprus**, for whom he is eligible through his mother, and scored on his debut v Montenegro.

SEPTEMBER 2026

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Gianluigi Donnarumma (Man City)	2
Alisson (Liverpool)	1
Elia Caprile (Cagliari)	1
Dominik Greif (Lyon)	1
David Raya (Arsenal)	1
Mile Svilar (Roma)	1
Bart Verbruggen (Brighton)	1

DEFENDERS

Pau Cubarsi (Barcelona)	3
Alex Grimaldo (Atletico Madrid)	3
Josko Gvardiol (Manchester City)	2
Mario Hermoso (Roma)	2
Matheus Nunes (Manchester City)	2
Waldemar Anton (B. Dortmund)	1
Zachary Athekame (Lyon)	1
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	1
Riccardo Calafiori (Arsenal)	1
Joao Cancelo (Barcelona)	1
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	1
Gabriel (Arsenal)	1
Miguel Gutierrez (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Jeremy Jacquet (Liverpool)	1
Abdukodir Khusanov (Man City)	1
Nuno Mendes (PSG)	1
Marc Pubill (Atletico Madrid)	1
Cristian Romero (Atletico Madrid)	1
Julian Ryerson (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Jonathan Tah (Bayern Munich)	1
Nuno Tavares (Lazio)	1
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	1
Luka Vuskovic (Brighton)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Michael Olise (Bayern Munich)	6
Pascal Gross (Brighton)	3
Rodri (Barcelona)	3
Enzo Fernandez (Manchester City)	2
Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	1
Martin Baturina (Como)	1
Jude Bellingham (Real Madrid)	1
Lamine Camara (Monaco)	1
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	1
Manu Kone (Roma)	1
Fermin Lopez (Barcelona)	1
Pedri (Barcelona)	1
Denis Zakaria (Monaco)	1

FORWARDS

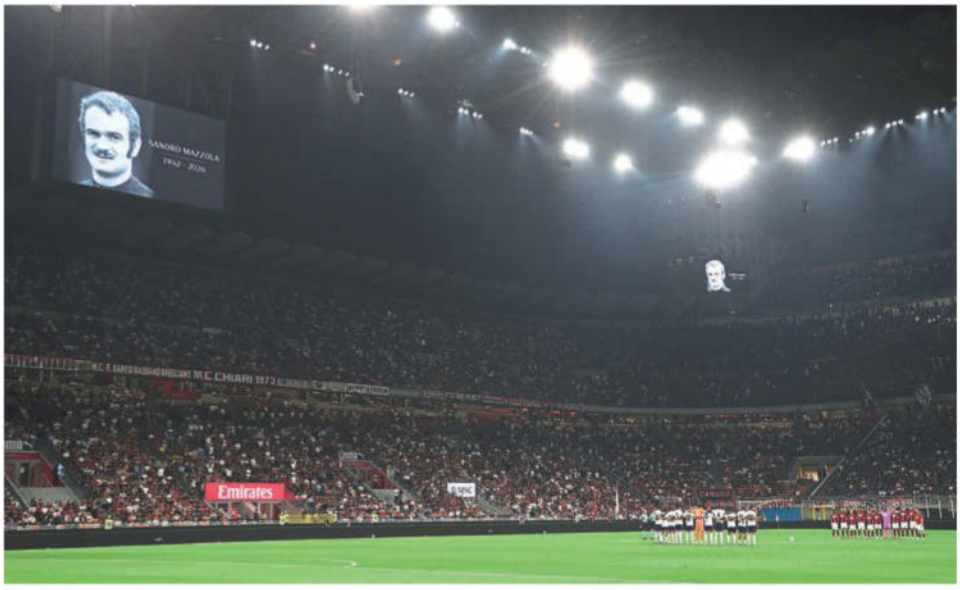
Raphinha (Barcelona)	6
Lamine Yamal (Barcelona)	6
Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	4
Harry Kane (Bayern Munich)	3
Donyell Malen (Roma)	2
Ferran Torres (PSG)	2
Alex Baena (Atletico Madrid)	1
Lautaro Martinez (Internazionale)	1
Goncalo Ramos (Milan)	1

ESM MEMBERS:
A Bola (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *ELF Voetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

"Sandro Mazzola was one of the greatest footballers in history. Not only in the history of the *Nerazzurri*. He was Inter's history: he joined the club as a boy and never left it"

Internazionale statement on the late Sandro Mazzola

OBITUARIES



Mazzola tribute...the San Siro remembers the ex-Inter player

Sandro MAZZOLA (1942-2026)
The greatest achievement of Sandro Mazzola lay beyond the trophies and medals from 17 years in the forefront of Italian football but in having played his way out of the intimidating shadow of his father Valentino and even emulating him. Mazzola died aged 83 in Milan, on September 19, the 100th birthday of his footballing home with Internazionale at the San Siro.

"Sandrino" was only six years old when his father Valentino and his Italian champion team-mates of *Il Grande Torino* were all killed in the Superga air disaster of May 1949. The shock was immense; Torino had been a fragile source of pride for an Italy seeking to redefine itself after the war.

Mazzola never played for Torino. Inter forward Benito Lorenzi, a family friend, fulfilled a promise to Valentino's widow to introduce the teenaged Sandro and his younger brother Ferruccio to youth coach Giuseppe Meazza at his own club, far from the emotional weight of a complex home life, school and sport in Turin. Milan, by coincidence, had also been Valentino's home city.

The potential of Mazzola was never in doubt but fulfilling that promise was a major one. He recalled: "It was so difficult because everyone expected me to be as talented as my father. But I didn't have the same qualities. The fans sometimes made very negative comments about me and that was hard to take, and it got so bad I even thought about giving up football at one stage."

Inter were relieved he did not. They were his only professional club and he scored 158 goals in 565 appearances, helping them win four Serie A titles, two European Cups and two Intercontinental Cups. Mazzola was a member of Italy's *Azzurri* who won the European Championship in 1968 and finished runners-up to Brazil at the World Cup in Mexico two years later. He was top scorer in Serie A with 17 goals in 1964-65 and, in an 11-year international career that began with a goalscoring debut against Brazil in May 1963, he struck 22 goals in 70 caps.

Mazzola made his Serie A debut in controversial circumstances at 18 when Inter fielded their youth side against Juventus in protest at being ordered by the FIGC to replay a match interrupted by hooligan trouble. Very soon he was a first-team regular in attack under the demanding Helenio Herrera.

Inter's iron-clad *Catenaccio* delivered a first *Scudetto* in nine years in 1962-63. One year later, Mazzola scored twice and provided an assist in Inter's 3-1 defeat of an ageing Real Madrid in the European Cup final in Vienna. Mazzola's pride was reinforced at the end by words of praise and the No.10 shirt from Madrid superstar Ferenc Puskas, who had played for Hungary against Valentino's Italy in 1947. "You are worthy of your father Valentino," the Hungarian told him.

Mazzola won the European Cup again, and the Intercontinental Cup, the following season then was a European Cup runner-up against Celtic in 1967 and against Johan Cruyff's Ajax in 1972. He remains the fastest goalscorer in the history of the Milan derby, notching after just 13 seconds on February 24, 1963, in a 1-1 draw.

The Italian football media was fixated for much of the 1960s and early 1970s with the supposed cross-city rivalry between Mazzola and Milan's Gianni Rivera. In fact, their off-field relationship was respectful if not friendly; in 1968 they worked together to set up a players' union. But national coaches Edmondo Fabbri then Ferruccio Valcareggi never found the key to dovetailing their talents.

This dysfunctionality reached its peak – or nadir – at the 1970 World Cup with the notorious *staffetta* (relay) when Rivera substituted Mazzola at half-time and to winning effect in the quarter-final and semi-final victories over Mexico and West Germany respectively. Mazzola played all the final, Rivera just the last six minutes.

Mazzola retired as a player in 1977 and later served as Inter's sporting director, his greatest coup being the signing of Ronaldo "*Il Fenomeno*" from Barcelona. He also had spells as sporting director of Genoa and Torino.

Reviewing his career, Mazzola said: "Maybe I could have studied and become something else but I know I wouldn't have felt at peace. Now I feel close to my father. Football brought us together again."

Ali BENDAYAN (1943-2026)
Morocco left-winger, nicknamed "Aliouate", who made his name at Raja Casablanca. Spent a league title-winning season with neighbours Wydad in 1968-69 before returning to Raja with whom he was twice a cup runner-up. Scored 11 goals in 28 games for Morocco.

Villan...Harry Burrows

Harry BURROWS (1941-2026)
Aston Villa's outside-left in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Made his debut in the 1959-60 promotion-winning season and scored one of Villa's goals in their

"He will be missed but his legacy will live forever and as a Czech goalkeeper I am grateful to Ludo as he opened the door for us goalkeepers to the Premier League"

Petr Cech pays tribute to his fellow Czech goalkeeper Ludek Miklosko

victory over Rotherham United in the inaugural League Cup final in 1961. Nicknamed "The Blast" for the power of his shot, Burrows was Villa's top scorer in 1961-62 and 1962-63, before joining Stoke City in 1965. He went on to score 79 goals in 281 games for the Potters.

Sergio CARPANESI (1936-2026)
A tenacious journeyman midfielder who was discovered by Fiorentina boss Fulvio Bernardini. Helped the *Viola* win the Serie A title in 1955-56, and later the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup and Coppa Italia with Roma. He then embarked on a 24-year coaching career, including two spells at his hometown club Spezia.

Hugh CURRAN (1943-2026)
Scotland centre-forward or inside-forward who was born in Lanarkshire but grew up in Dublin. Briefly on Manchester United's books as an apprentice, he earned a goalscoring reputation with Millwall and Norwich City. Joined Wolverhampton Wanderers for £60,000 in 1969. His goals included the first in an English league match to be broadcast live in Norway, Denmark and Sweden – the lone winner against Sunderland in November 1969. That same month Curran made the first of his five Scotland appearances in a 2-0 World Cup qualifying defeat by Austria. His only Scotland goal was in a 3-1 defeat to England at Wembley in 1971. His last game for Wolves was the second leg of the 1972 UEFA Cup final defeat by Tottenham Hotspur. Later played for Oxford United and Bolton Wanderers before injury forced his retirement.

Scotland striker... Hugh Curran at Wembley in 1971

Sukru ERSOY (1931-2026)
Former Turkey, Fenerbahce and Salzburg goalkeeper who, before his death, had been the oldest living World Cup footballer, playing once at the 1954 finals in the 7-2 group stage play-off defeat to West Germany.

Jorge Ramirez GALLEGO (1940-2026)
All-time leading marksman for Colombian outfit Deportivo Cali with 171 goals between 1965 and 1973. Forward Gallego had previously won three titles with Millonarios of Bogota. Scored four goals in 14 games for Colombia between 1966 and 1970.

Andre GUY (1941-2026)
Stalwart centre-forward of French football in the 1960s. Started with Sochaux then won the second and top division titles in successive years with Saint-Etienne in 1963 and 1964, but his greatest success was with Lyon. Guy hit 76 goals in 126 matches between 1967 and 1971, including 25 in 1968-69 – then a club record for most league goals in a season. Later joined Rennes with whom he won the French Cup in 1971, beating Lyon in the final. Played eight times for France between 1964 and 1968, scoring two goals.

Gyozo MARTOS (1949-2026)
Hungary defender at the 1978 and 1982 World Cups, winning 34 caps. Played more than 200 times for Ferencvaros between 1971 and 1979, winning the league and cup four times and finishing runner-up in the European Cup Winners' Cup final against Dynamo Kyiv in 1975.

Ludek MIKLOSKO (1961-2026)
Popular goalkeeper with Banik Ostrava and West Ham United. "Ludo" joined the Hammers in 1990 and played 373 games over eight years. Returned as goalkeeper coach after crossing to West London with QPR. A West Ham statement hailed Miklosko as "our beloved, inspirational goalkeeper and gentle giant of a man." He was West Ham's Player of the Year in 1990-91 when they won promotion to the old First Division and reached the semi-finals of the FA Cup. Played 40 times for Czechoslovakia between 1982 and 1992 and then twice for the Czech Republic.

Hammers legend...goalkeeper Ludek Miklosko

Kevin MILLER (1969-2026)
Goalkeeper who starred for a host of clubs across the EFL during his career including Exeter City, Birmingham City, Watford, Crystal Palace, Barnsley, Bristol Rovers, Southampton and Torquay United.

Peter NOGLY (1947-2026)
Long-time captain of Hamburg, making 414 appearances and scoring 52 goals including the first in their 2-0 German Cup final victory over Kaiserslautern in 1976. Also a winner of the European Cup Winners' Cup in 1976-77 and Bundesliga in 1978-79, before ending his HSV career in the 1980 European Cup final loss to Nottingham Forest – which he always described as his "most painful defeat."

Played in the North American Soccer League with Edmonton Drillers and Tampa Bay Rowdies, before returning home for single-season spells with Hertha Berlin and St Pauli. Nogly was an unused substitute in the West Germany runners-up squad at the 1976 European Championship. Later served as a Hamburg director.

Ken TAYLOR (1935-2026)
Long-serving defender with Huddersfield Town between 1953 and 1965 and talented cricketer, playing as a batsman for Yorkshire and representing England in test matches between 1959 and 1964.

Milton VIERA (1946-2026)
Uruguay midfielder who won the first of his five caps (scoring one goal) in the goalless draw with England at Wembley that kicked off the 1966 World Cup. At 20, Viera was the youngest player in the squad selected by coach Ondino Viera, his second cousin.

Won two league titles with Nacional and played without success for old rivals Penarol after a disappointing year with Boca Juniors in Argentina. Finished on the losing side in Copa Libertadores finals with both Nacional in 1967 and Penarol in 1970. In the latter final, Penarol lost 1-0 to Estudiantes de La Plata in the first leg but were held goalless at home after a Viera free-kick hit a post, ran along the goal-line, hit the other post and bounced back into play.

He was surprisingly transferred in 1972 to Olympiacos in Greece, where he won three league titles and two cups. They thought him finished after a hernia injury but he proved them wrong by winning the league and cup again with local rivals AEK Athens.

Words by Keir Radnedge & Jamie Evans

eye witness

Carl Worswick reports

COLOMBIA

James Rodriguez's Colombian homecoming

As a final act, it was not the one that James Rodriguez might have wished for. Not like this, not right now. Yet with transfer windows crashing shut all around him and after a subdued World Cup with Colombia, the player once valued at £63 million by Real Madrid turned back to the one place where the love and admiration still burned bright.

"The greatest joins the greatest," announced Atletico Nacional on their social media channels in mid-September as the 2014 World Cup sensation brushed down the shirt of Colombia's most successful team and puffed out his chest.

A return to Europe had been the mission. But only tiny Avellino of the Italian second division had shown any interest. Faced with a desiccated pool of options, the 35-year-old returned to where it all began.

Across his native Colombia, a media and fan frenzy immediately exploded. A thousand official Nacional shirts were shifted within the first 24 hours of Rodriguez's signing. Season-ticket sales rocketed past 23,000 and the nation's headlines began talk of "Jamesmania." As the highest-paid player in the history of the Colombian league, an overzealous local press pondered whether this was the start of a golden era for the domestic game.

"Times change and I admit that if you'd have asked me even three or four days ago, I'd have said no," explained James, as he's known to all Colombians, when asked about previous comments dismissing any possibility of a return. "But I have to admit it's been a very long time since a club has made me feel this way."

Less than a week later and with only a couple of training sessions under his belt, James made his debut. In his first game back following almost 19 years abroad, the former Real Madrid, Bayern Munich and Everton star travelled to the capital to face Internacional de Bogota, a club co-owned by Ryan Reynolds but boasting a mere few hundred fans. Seeking to cash in on the hysteria, Internacional switched the match from their habitual home of El Techo to the much bigger El Campin ground. The fixture sold out instantly.

Outside the bustling high-altitude stadium, there was only one name being peddled by the matchday street vendors. Counterfeit green-and-white Nacional shirts, flags, scarves and commemorative T-shirts and posters all bore James' name. It was clear who everybody had come to see.

Amid fireworks trailing green plumes of smoke that illuminated Bogota's night sky, James walked out to rapturous applause from the overwhelmingly Nacional-supporting crowd. Wearing the No.23 shirt after a request to reassign team-mate Edwin Cardona's No.10 had been rejected by the league, it didn't take long for the midfielder's magic left foot to fire into action.

Within two minutes of coming on as a second-half substitute, Nacional went 2-1 ahead. Toiling for a loose ball in midfield, James poked the ball forward for Argentine Elias Cabrera who crashed an effort in off the bar. Still, the best was saved for the last stroke. With the game now tied at 2-2, James swung in one of his trademark corners and Juan Manuel Zapata leapt to head home the winner.

"The legacy James has built in Colombian football, especially for the national team and representing us abroad, is already immense – it will be difficult to match in the next 50 years," Nacional manager Lucas Gonzalez purred in his post-match press conference. "We're very fortunate to have him here with us."

A dream debut and the fairy-tale return. But despite all the buzz and excitement over the return of a country's idol, in recent years the playmaker's moments in the sun have been few and far between. Flitting across four continents at six different clubs since leaving Everton in 2021, his career has slumped down a peripatetic path pot-holed by niggling injuries, quarrels with managers, and a reluctance to put in the hard yards.

His most recent club, Major League Soccer outfit Minnesota United, followed a familiar script. Unveiled as a marquee signing in February with the added motivation of building match fitness ahead of Colombia's World Cup campaign, James played just 265 minutes. The flashes of genius remained but, ultimately, when he left the US there were few complaints from Loons fans. His moaning about playing on artificial pitches had again enhanced a perceived diva reputation.

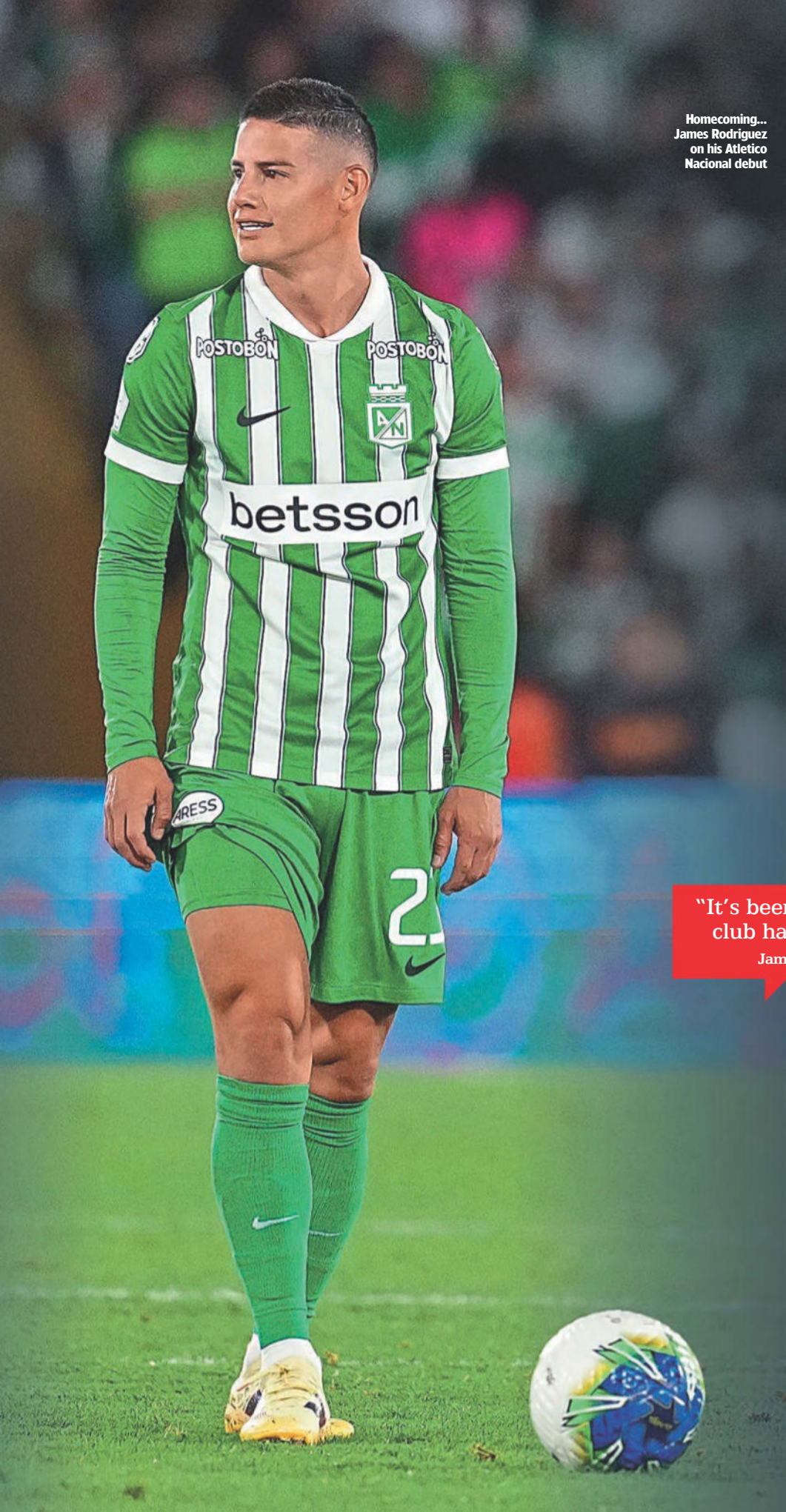
In Colombia though, he was still No.1. His dazzling performances at the 2014 World Cup – dragging his country to a historic quarter-final appearance, scoring a spectacular volley against Uruguay that won him the Puskas Prize, becoming the first Colombian player to win the Golden Boot and then earning a huge-money move to Real Madrid – only tells half the story.

For Colombians, his impact was even more significant. Returning to a World Cup after 16 years, this was an opportunity to craft a fresh national reputation distinct from the usual stereotypes that had long stained Colombia's image: drug cartels, bombs, senseless bloodshed and civil strife, a nation seemingly stuck in an unwinnable struggle to restore peace and order.

But in just a few short weeks of that summer of 2014, a 22-year-old footballer helped add a new positive layer to Colombia's international prestige. Swelled by their legions of supporters that coloured Brazilian stadiums yellow everywhere they went, James became the protagonist of a team that brought joy, positive energy, dancing and a touch of football romanticism to the show. Neutral fans had little trouble picking their side.

Before the dust had settled on that summer in Brazil, James had been elevated alongside Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Shakira as one of Colombia's most famous names. Years later and with his club career on the slide, James' status back home as Colombia's leader remained virtually untouched.

At the 2026 World Cup there was never any real doubt that head coach Nestor Lorenzo would build his team around the No.10. But the veteran's



Homecoming... James Rodriguez on his Atletico Nacional debut

physical decline was hard to ignore. When Colombia crashed out to Switzerland on penalties in the last 16, James knew his time on the international stage was up. On the eve of his Nacional debut, Colombia's second-most-capped player of all time poignantly pulled the curtain down on his *Cafeteros* career.

"I want to speak to you from the heart," James said in his farewell video after 131 caps. "After many years, many matches, many moments of joy, and also some tough times, I feel the moment has come to close one of the most important chapters of my life."

As a new chapter now begins in Medellin, James will at least be surrounded by some familiar faces in the Colombian league. In the same week of his homecoming, his former Colombia team-mate Juan Cuadrado signed with Bogota giants Millonarios. Then, 39-year-old striker Jackson Martinez, who James played with at Porto in 2012, joined Juan Fernando Quintero at Nacional's local rivals DIM. Incredibly, his last competitive game had been over six years ago.

With the likes of 41-year-old Hugo Rodallega still banging in the goals at Santa Fe and 2014 Colombia World Cup stars Carlos Bacca (40) and Teo Gutierrez (41) also leading the line for Cali and Junior respectively, questions have been raised as to whether the return of Colombia's golden generation has turned the league into a retirement home.

At the very least, the stars of yesteryear have shined new attention and glamour on a tired domestic football scene that has long struggled to perform. In the past eight years, no Colombian team has reached the semi-final of either of South America's club tournaments. It's an issue that troubles many in the game; as the continent's second-most populous nation, Colombia should be doing much better.

> "It's been a very long time since a club has made me feel this way"
> **James at his Atletico Nacional unveiling**

Yet the big names are unlikely to have much of a lasting impact. With Colombia's fiscal rules requiring players to stump up and pay tax on all their global assets if they spend more than half a calendar year in the country, the big-name players do not tend to remain long. But, for now, the former Colombia captain has perhaps one final opportunity to brush aside the last few years and finish his career on a high. The final leg of a once glittering career may have fallen prematurely. But for James' adoring fans, it's also a chance to at long last see one of the country's greatest players up close and personal.

Mural...a nod to Brazilian football in Kolkata, India

eye witness

Neel Shelat reports

INDIA

Brazil's first trip to India

There are David v Goliath clashes, and then there is India v Brazil.

India might be the world's most populous country, with about seven times as many citizens as Brazil, but on the footballing front they are oceans apart. With five World Cup titles, the *Selecao* are the most successful men's national team while India are still waiting for their debut on the big stage. The Blue Tigers were ranked 138th in the world coming into this friendly, having fallen some way from their all-time high of 94th in 1996. Brazil, on the other hand, have only dropped out of the top ten once since the FIFA rankings were introduced back in 1992, and that was well over a decade ago.

Despite the national team's startling lack of success, football is a popular sport in India. In fact, there are even some pockets of the country where it overtakes the national religion, cricket. Among major cities, the indisputable footballing hub is Kolkata, so it was the obvious choice to host the South American giants.

Located in the East Indian state of West Bengal, Kolkata is the country's third most populated metropolitan area. Its status derives in no small part from its role as the de facto capital of British India until 1911. The imperial legacy in the city stretches back to the East India Company's 17th-century construction of Fort William, a pivotal site in the colonisation of India.

Consequently, it is also an important location in the history of Indian football; the British were the ones who brought the sport to the country. The now-defunct Calcutta FC had the distinction of being India's first-ever football club, while Mohun Bagan, the oldest active one, is also based in the "City of Joy".

Mohun Bagan is also the most successful football club in India, with over 250 trophies in their cabinet. Their derby with East Bengal is one of the fiercest rivalries in Asian football, with over a century of history spurring on both sets of players and fans. When they met in the 1997 Federation Cup semi-final, more than 130,000 fans squeezed inside the Salt Lake Stadium, one of the biggest attendances ever recorded at a football match in Asia.

It was partly because of the popularity of these two teams that the Salt Lake Stadium, officially known as the Vivekananda Yuba Bharati Krirangan (VYBK), was built in 1984. Today, it stands as a rare example of large-scale investment in Indian football; general neglect for over half a century has otherwise led to the deterioration of the sport's infrastructure and quality on the national stage.

The appetite for football in India has always remained, but the struggles of both the domestic league and the national team means fans have had to look elsewhere for teams to follow. Across India, the two premier South American national teams, Brazil and Argentina, have been adopted by millions.

There are a multitude of factors to explain this phenomenon: attractive styles of play, iconic players and a shared status as outsiders against the European hegemony. Kolkata's love story with Brazil might have begun with the visit of Pele's New York Cosmos in 1977, when they were held to a 2-2 draw by Mohun Bagan at Eden Gardens.

Big welcome...India supporters wave flags outside Kolkata's Salt Lake Stadium

In typical Kolkata fashion, supporters cheered for the visitors just as much as they did for the hosts as the two teams got underway on October 3.

Despite the obvious appeal of the match, it did not go down entirely well among loyal Indian national team fans. The key issue was a scheduling clash with the inaugural FIFA ASEAN Cup, a Southeast Asian regional tournament to which India had been invited. Fans wanted the Blue Tigers to sharpen themselves by competing against opponents of similar quality after recent disappointments, which included a failure to qualify for the 2027 Asian Cup and free-falling down the FIFA rankings since their last top-100 entry in 2023.

The bigger question, though, was financial. The All India Football Federation (AIFF) did not confirm the expenditure for this series, but estimates say that it was a significant chunk of its annual budget.

Following their last-16 exit from the World Cup, Brazil were clearly not on a victory lap, and had little to gain from the fixture from a sporting perspective, so only a compelling financial incentive would have convinced them to travel. The same could also be said of Panama and Uruguay, who also came to take on the Blue Tigers in the same window.

Consider also that the ASEAN Cup had a healthy prize pot on offer, and the AIFF's decision to turn it down and host games instead was a bold one.

At a time when the Indian Super League (ISL) has been impacted by financial challenges – among a myriad of other issues – the wisdom of such exuberant spending on what essentially are exhibition matches is likely to be questioned. And that is without saying anything about the state of grassroots football infrastructure in the country, which lies beyond neglected.

Unexpectedly, the Blue Tigers did come away with a result from the series. While the two big draws were in Kolkata against the South American nations, Panama played in Bengaluru first. The impressively even contest ended 1-1, with Australian-born forward Ryan Williams (more on page 64) scoring the opener.

But a promising result against the Canal Men counted for little in the lead up to the Brazil fixture. Carlo Ancelotti fired a warning shot ahead of the match, stating that there was no such thing as a friendly for the *Selecao*. Even though some stars such as Raphinha and Rodrygo had not travelled due to injury issues, he had a formidable squad at his disposal. The Italian tactician named a strong starting XI, including Marquinhos at the back and Vinicius Junior and Estevao on the wings.

Despite all the interest and advertising, only around half the 85,000-seater

Ones to watch ...Ryan Williams attempts to tackle Vinicius Junior

Goalscorers...Brazil duo Estevao and Pedro celebrate

Despite all the interest and advertising, only around half the 85,000-seater stadium appeared to be occupied during the match

stadium appeared to be occupied during the match, with the official attendance confirmed as 51,402. Not everyone was seated at kick-off either as fans were let in slowly; organisers were very keen to avoid a repeat of the shambles that surrounded Lionel Messi's appearance at the ground in 2025, when disgruntled fans ripped up seats and threw them onto the pitch when the Argentina icon appeared all too briefly.

High prices were the main reason behind the high volume of unsold tickets, and last-minute giveaways couldn't quite fill the stands either. Still, those who were in the venue were determined to make their voices heard. They screamed for Vinicius Junior just as much as they did for Williams and, while both players showed some glimpses of quality, the first period was a rather slow and stale affair.

Brazil at times were barely even playing at walking pace, but they took the lead before the half-hour mark when Gurpreet Singh Sandhu failed to save Estevao's shot at the near post. The Indian goalkeeper did not cover himself in glory for the second goal either, as his weak hand failed to keep out Pedro's finish. Substitute Samuel Lino of Flamengo added another just before the hour mark, and a fourth in stoppage time, as the visitors wrapped up a comfortable 4-0 win without ever getting out of second gear.

While the match will go down as a landmark night for the Indian players and supporters, it is unlikely to have a big-picture impact in the story of Indian football, with the various challenges showing no signs of abating. But the new ISL season kicking off later in the month could be a turning point; it will be the first campaign of the club-led model in which participating teams will have more direct control over things like broadcasting and sponsorship. How they fare in that regard will play a much bigger part in determining the future of the beautiful game in the world's most populous nation.

eye witness

Joel Richards reports

ARGENTINA

Life after Leo

Emotional...Messi cries as he addresses the fans after winning his 208th and final cap for Argentina

"I never stopped fighting or giving everything, I always want to be here," an emotional Lionel Messi told a packed Monumental. In Buenos Aires, 85,000 supporters filled the River Plate stadium to see their hero play in the country's colours one last time. It was the end of an era. Argentine Football Association (AFA) president Claudio Tapia billed it as "The Last Tango". It was less a match than an act of communion.

The palpable emotion that had run through the build-up culminated with Messi addressing the faithful. He paid tribute to his father Jorge, who died recently. His children, who had joined him on the pitch for the national anthems, were in tears. So too were his team-mates, standing behind their captain. "It will be painful, I always want to be with the national team, it is the most beautiful thing that can happen to you."

Messi spoke of the privilege of playing for his country. Supporters echoed a similar feeling at simply having witnessed him wear the blue and white shirt. "We are privileged to have seen him and enjoyed his football," says 38-year-old Nicolas, at the game with his eight-year-old son, both sporting No.10 shirts. "We are grateful for everything he did for us."

The University of Buenos Aires awarded him an honorary doctorate. River Plate named him an honorary club member. During the captain's handshake, opponents Benin handed over gifts from their players for Messi.

Outside the stadium before the match, the full Messi iconography was on show – the tattoos, the flags, the blue and white flares, the two-metre tall drum with "*Gracias Eternas*" (Eternal Thanks) emblazoned on the side, the men in Messi masks charging for a "photo with their hero", the replica World Cup trophies, T-shirts with the outline of the *Islas Malvinas*. And, of course, there were songs about beating England.

"He was down to earth, he showed humility," says Patricia, there with her two grandchildren both decked out in Messi shirts. The retiree talked of Lionel as an example for the younger generations, "and he took us to the very top of the world with his football."

As supporters flooded into the Monumental, singing and chanting, the team bus made its way to the stadium. Footage showed Messi in tears. Videos on social media showed his own team-mates raucously singing for him "not to go."

"Captain of this ship, master of a legacy, god on this land," wrote midfield general Rodrigo de Paul on social media, "it was a pleasure to stand by your side." Defender Nicolas Otamendi, who also played his last game for Argentina, wrote to "the best player of all time, who taught us to never stop believing, to stand up after every fall, and to defend this shirt with heart."

Midfielder Enzo Fernandez was in tears during Messi's speech. As a 15-year-old in River Plate's youth academy, the midfielder wrote a letter to Messi when *El Diez* momentarily retired in 2016. Now Fernandez was standing alongside him. "You are my hero, it was a dream come true to meet you, to play alongside you and to be world champion with you."

In more than two decades with the national team, Messi took on a dimension that transcended football in a way only comparable to Maradona's legacy. "I've never seen that aura in anyone else in my life," said head coach Lionel Scaloni. "He leaves an incredible legacy. There will never be anything like it on the field of play."

The exhibition match against Benin may be all but a footnote, but it was one that served for Messi to increase his national team numbers, with two assists and a goal.

Messi's penalty against Benin was his 126th goal for the national team. After 208 games in 21 years, he is Argentina's most capped player and all-time leading scorer. ▸

Final international... Lionel Messi during Argentina's game against Benin

Argentina captain since 2011, Messi guided *La Albiceleste* to four major titles: the 2021 and 2024 Copa America and the 2022 Finalissima, with the crowning moment being the 2022 World Cup in Qatar – Argentina's third World Cup crown. He played at six World Cups and reached three finals. His two assists in the epic 2026 World Cup semi-final victory against England are very much considered as a badge of honour too. The players unfurling the flag about the "*Malvinas*" added nationalistic and political spice to that win, and deepened the bond between supporters and the group of players – and Messi – even more.

It was not always the case. There was the 2014 World Cup final defeat to Germany, and then the decision to retire from the national team after losing two Copa America finals in the following two years. There was also the disastrous 2018 World Cup campaign. There was criticism; that his performances did not match his Barcelona form, or that he did not sing the national anthem, or that he was too quiet.

But after gaining a head of steam on the way to winning the 2021 Copa America – in the very own backyard of their eternal rivals Brazil – the narrative shifted. In Qatar, many players said they wanted to win the World Cup for Messi as much as for themselves.

Back-to-back titles was too much to ask. "We were close," said Messi of the final against Spain, which Argentina lost 1-0. "There was nothing strange," he added, refuting the conspiracy theorists. "The England game took a huge toll on us, physically and emotionally. We were running on empty."

So what now for Argentina? Messi lifted the collective, and now more than ever Argentina need a collective response.

Perhaps most crucially, Scaloni is now set to continue as head coach. His

"Thank you for everything, my captain"... Argentina fans display a banner in the stands

Send off...Messi leaves the pitch in an Argentina shirt for the last time

assistant Walter Samuel had been rumoured to be considering a move to pursue his own coaching career, but now also looks set to remain. Samuel's importance was underlined by how Argentina celebrated Alexis Mac Allister's header against Switzerland in the World Cup. Players and Scaloni rushed to the former defender in recognition of his role as mastermind of the set-piece that led to Argentina's goal. With Pablo Aimar, the other assistant coach, also staying on, the backroom team remains.

One job is to find leaders to fill the void Messi leaves. As captain, he was unlike Argentina's other World Cup winners, centre-back Daniel Passarella in 1978 and Diego Maradona in 1986. Both were outspoken, forthright and confrontational figures. Messi was never that figure. Scaloni pointedly said: "We're not looking for a *caudillo* [strongman]. We're looking for positive people."

Arguably, 28-year-old Atletico Madrid central defender Cristian "Cuti" Romero fits both descriptions, and was picked as captain for the matches against both Bolivia and Burkina Faso that preceded the Benin game. At 34 years of age, vice-captain and goalkeeper Emiliano "Dibu" Martinez is not a long-term understudy to Romero, but the Chelsea shot-stopper brings more continuity and leadership in the coming months. Internazionale striker Lautaro Martinez cuts a different figure to both Romero and his namesake Dibu and was named third captain.

The friendlies against Bolivia and Burkina Faso offered the first clues of the coaching staff's thinking, even if Argentina were up against 78th and 62nd ranked sides in the world respectively (not to mention chaotic travel plans that led to Burkina Faso arriving in the country five hours before kick-off with their youth team players).

So what now for Argentina? Messi lifted the collective, and now more than ever Argentina need a collective response

Beyond Messi's leadership were the sheer number of goals and assists, as well as the imagination and creativity that he consistently delivered, and that is what Argentina must now find.

There are contenders for playmaker. Como attacking midfielder Nico Paz appears the most articulate player in the creative role and brings guile and elegance to the position. He scored twice in the FIFA window including, fittingly, one against Benin that was not only assisted by Messi but a near-perfect imitation of him, curling in left-footed from the edge of the box.

There are also very high hopes for Franco Mastantuono, for whom Real Madrid paid over €60 million last year after flashes of promise with River Plate as a 17-year-old. He is now on loan at Fiorentina having not settled into the first team at the Bernabeu and missing out on the World Cup squad.

Yet nobody expects any single player to make the difference. What Argentina do have is an established and experienced core of players, including Julian Alvarez, Enzo Fernandez and Alexis Mac Allister.

The rebuild is underway. Scaloni handed debuts to seven players during the September-October international break, including Boca Juniors teenager Leonel Flores who had scored twice for his club less than 24 hours before playing against Burkina Faso. In attack, Alvarez and Martinez started all three friendly games – something rarely seen when Messi was in the picture – while performances from midfielder Valentin Barco and forward Gianluca Prestianni gave Scaloni plenty of optimism.

It was not all positive. There was some disappointment at not being able to secure more prestigious and testing opponents for international friendlies, which has become an issue. This year, Argentina have hosted Mauritania, Zambia, Honduras and Iceland.

There are financial implications with Messi's international retirement too. The drone show at the farewell game underlined AFA's priorities. Beyond the bizarre sight of a giant Messi in the sky hitting the ball with his right foot rather than his left, the drones then spelt out a sponsor's name – to jeers from the crowd.

A swathe of sponsorship deals have seen income rocket to US$80m per year according to the AFA. But an Argentina national team without Messi and without a star with such global reach will impact marketing strategies.

For now, Argentina's focus turns to the 2028 Copa America and somehow navigating the coming months – and years – of life without Leo.

Heir apparent... Messi celebrates with goalscorer Nico Paz

eye witness

Glenn Moore reports

ENGLAND

Kang's London City Lionesses ready to roar

"*Vamos* Alexia" came the cry from the stands, where normally the cheers are for striker Michael Cheek and the Bromley men's team. On the pitch, Alexia Putellas, the first two-time Ballon d'Or winner to grace the modest Hayes Lane ground, responded through her silky passing and clever movement.

With the Spain superstar knitting together their multi-national XI, London City Lionesses eased to a 2-1 victory over Manchester United on the opening night of the 2026-27 Women's Super League season.

In the away end, the visiting fans chorused the familiar refrain: "You've only come to see United," but not this time. The club-record gate, the TV cameras and packed press box were all there to see the former Barcelona midfielder, making her debut in the teal shirt of LCL with "ALEXIA 11" on her back.

Putellas was the reason the WSL launched the new campaign with a Friday-night meeting between the clubs that finished sixth and fourth the previous season. But the fact that she was at this small suburban arena, on the Kentish fringe of southeast London, was due to another woman wearing teal, walking around proudly with "KANG 27" on the back of her shirt.

Not many owners wear the club kit to matches, but Michele Kang is not like other owners. The 67-year-old US medical tech billionaire is a woman on a mission, using her fortune to promote women's sport, especially football.

Already the owner of Washington Spirit in the NWSL and OL Lyonnes in France, London City Lionesses are her most ambitious vehicle yet, the first independent team in the WSL, taking on the financial might of Chelsea, Arsenal and the Manchester clubs.

Their current setting is modest. Bromley were in Non-League until 2024 and, while they have worked hard on Hayes Lane, lifting the capacity to around 6,000, it shows – not least as only two sides are seated.

London City Lionesses owner ...Michele Kang

But for LCL, this is likely just a staging post. When Kang bought the club in December 2023, they were even further out of the capital, in Dartford, Kent. Another move is under consideration with talks having taken place with the Mayor of London's office over moving into the National Sports Centre stadium in Crystal Palace Park. An FA Cup final arena from 1895 to 1914, it is currently configured as an athletics stadium but seats more than 15,000 and has plenty of room to expand.

This sounds like a lot for an outfit whose average gate is less than 4,000, but not when you consider that when Kang arrived it was only around 400. Growth has been impressive for a club without the name recognition and emotional leverage of a men's team, and Kang's approach is clear.

"If you put the best product on the pitch, best players, best coaching, best infrastructure, and you treat your supporters the way they should, invest in fan engagement, they show up," she said. "Demand is not the major problem. They will come if we invest."

And so they did. Fans arrived from North America and across Europe to see Putellas play. The World Cup winner is but one of many star recruits and while the wages and signing-on fees are their main draw, there is also truth in the claim that they want to be part of a project that puts women first.

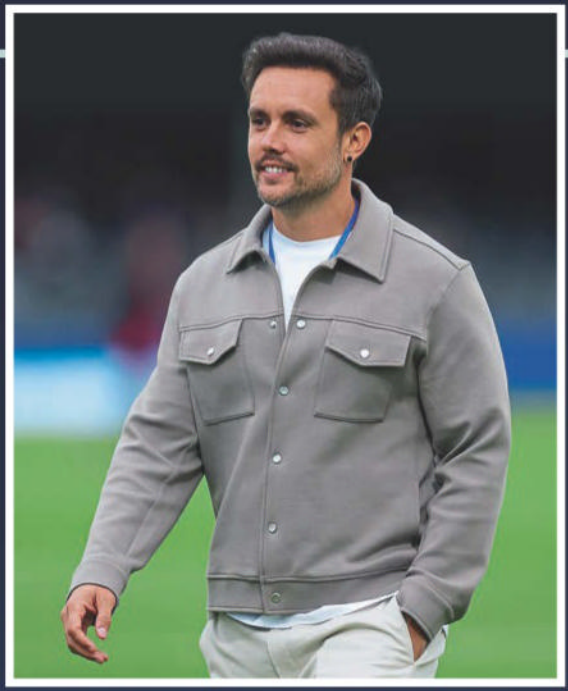
This is especially so for those coming from clubs where the women's team can feel like an afterthought – which, in reality, is almost all of them; even Barcelona play most of their matches in the 6,000-seater Estadi Johan Cruyff, which is rarely full.

Add in the state-of-the-art training centre that Kang is building in Kent, and the arrival of Putellas becomes less outlandish.

The policy of bringing in big stars ▸

Marquee signing ...Alexia Putellas

Ambitious...Kang greets the LCL fans


Head coach... Eder Maestre

has certainly attracted attention – and sponsors. Nike have struck a £3 million-a-year shirtfront sponsorship deal, a record for the women's game.

Leading Spanish newspaper *El Pais* devoted their colour magazine's cover story to Putellas' summer move to London featuring a series of clichéd photographs depicting her in front of the iconic London Underground logo, with a full English breakfast, drinking tea and posing in front of the Houses of Parliament.

Putellas, though, is not here to sightsee: "She is here to win," said her new team-mate Delphine Cascarino.

The France forward also noted the significance of Kang's presence. "It's really important to have her around the team. She is a businesswoman with a really good vision. We believe in her. She wants to build something big."

Kang's interest in soccer is relatively recent. Born and raised in South Korea, she moved to the US as a student and, after graduating from the University of Chicago, then Yale, quickly progressed in business management. In 2008 she formed her own healthcare tech company, Cognosante, and a related venture capital firm. These proved so successful she is, according to *Forbes*, a billionaire.

Her success made her a notable figure and she was invited to a reception for the 2019 World Cup-winning US team. That seems to have awakened something in her and in late 2020, she became a part-owner of Washington Spirit. "I believe it is essential for successful women to take the lead in advancing other women," she declared.

Backed by the players, she bought the club outright in March 2022 and Spirit are now firmly established as an NWSL powerhouse. Star striker Trinity Rodman is the league's highest-paid player with a $2m-a-year deal, and

Under the lights... London City Lionesses take on Manchester United in Bromley

Kang also signed Tanzania forward Clara Luvanga from Saudi Arabian club Al Nassr, with some reports claiming her fee (officially undisclosed) surpasses the world-record £1.4 million LCL paid to sign Grace Geyoro from Paris Saint-Germain in September 2025.

It did not take long for Kang's ambitions to become international. In 2023 she joined the ownership group of Olympique Lyon, subsequently taking control of the women's team – the most successful in Europe with eight Champions League titles, now rebranded as OL Lyonnes.

Then she looked across the Channel where the name London City caught her eye, as well it might from a global marketing viewpoint given there are no other professional teams, of either gender, called London.

LCL had formed in 2019 as a breakaway from Millwall Lionesses (Millwall's men are nicknamed the Lions), one of the sport's pioneers in England. They were in the second tier, surviving rather than flourishing when Kang took over in December 2023.

In her first full season, with a head coach poached from Paris Saint-Germain, Sweden captain Kosovare Asllani in midfield and compatriot Sofia Jakobsson signed from San Diego Wave, LCL won the title and promotion.

A slew of internationals came in for their debut WSL season, headed by France midfielder Geyoro. Dutch veteran Danielle van de Donk, Italy captain Elena Linari and Cascarino also arrived, plus England Lioness Nikita Parris. With Jocelyn Precheur replaced in the dugout mid-season by Eder Maestre (all Kang's clubs are currently coached by Spaniards) they came a solid sixth, impressive for a promoted club.

This summer, besides Putellas, six other internationals arrived including her former Barcelona team-mate Mapi Leon, England Euro 2022-winning keeper Mary Earps, and France forward Kadidiatou Diani.

How, many have wondered, does this level of spending meet financial fair play regulations? The majority of the arrivals, including Putellas, were on free transfers but more significant is that as well as being allowed to spend up to 80% of their women's team revenue, WSL clubs can receive a cash injection of up to £4m from their owners.

> "If you put the best product on the pitch, best players, best coaching, best infrastructure, and you treat your supporters the way they should, invest in fan engagement, they show up"
>
> **London City Lionesses owner Michele Kang**

Earps and Diani remained on the bench against United, and were not needed. Cascarino was outstanding and Van de Donk influential as LCL dominated the ball and the match. Despite the four debutants, they were far more coherent than United, their interplay often as smooth as the beige shacket, cream slacks and white trainers combo sported in the technical area by Maestre.

The visitors, adapting to new coach Eva Olid, another Spaniard, fresh from leading Hearts to the Scottish title, were flattered by the 2-1 defeat. Goalkeeper Phallon Tullis-Joyce was by far their best player, while their goal did not come until the last minute. They conceded twice from set-pieces, first an own goal and then a clever Van de Donk finish.

At the end, a question lingered. Does this mean that London City are genuine challengers, or that United are simply not very good? Of the two clubs, United have hugely greater income and a bigger fanbase, but Kang is investing in her team while Jim Ratcliffe and the Glazers appear more focused on United men.

The following week came an answer of sorts as LCL lost 2-1 at West Ham United, a lack of pace at the back exposed by two counter-attacks, and United were thrashed 5-0 at home by Chelsea. It was clear Olid has a job on her hands but a more defensively-minded display then secured a draw at Arsenal before a first win, over West Ham, quietened talk of crisis.

Meanwhile LCL bounced back with victories over Charlton Athletic and Brighton & Hove Albion. In the latter, in front of a 4,000-plus Saturday lunchtime crowd, Putellas scored her first goal. *Vamos* indeed.

Summer arrival... Putellas' former Barcelona team-mate Mapi Leon

GRACE GEYORO

"The club want to do big things"

The most expensive player in the history of the women's game discusses her time with London City Lionesses

A year on from your transfer to London City Lionesses, you are still listed as the most expensive women's player in the world. How does it feel to be valued at over £1 million?
It was a very big surprise for me to be the most expensive player in the world. It's very flattering. The club want to do big things in the Women's Super League, in the world game. We want to grow and try to win a lot of titles, and quickly. That's why they paid the money for me last year.

How would you rate your first season at London City Lionesses?
It was my first season in this league. It was a little bit difficult in terms of adaptation because it's very different and very dramatic in a competitive league. There are a lot of big teams and big players. Now it's my second year, I think I am more confident because I now know my opponents, I know the level. It will be better this year for me playing and enjoying my time here with my team-mates.

You signed for Jocelyn Precheur, who you also worked with at Paris Saint-Germain, but now you are playing under Eder Maestre. What differences have you noticed between the two coaches?
The new coach is very tactical. He is very demanding too because he wants us to do our best. He likes to meet with the players and discuss ideas, to share a lot of things about the game, about the training sessions.

This summer, your former Paris Saint-Germain team-mate Kadidiatou Diani joined you at London City Lionesses. Do you think she could be one of the players to watch in the WSL season?
Yes, she is a very good player. I've played with her in the national team and at Paris Saint-Germain too. I think the WSL is a league for her because she is strong and very fast. She likes to have a big defender in front of her. This is a league for her and we want to help her to develop here.

On paper, London City Lionesses have signed a lot of players who want to play in a similar attacking position: Diani, Alexia Putellas, Danielle van de Donk, Rosa Kafaji, Kosovare Asllani when she returns from injury, and yourself. Do you accept you may have to sit out some games this season?
Yes, of course. I think it's the way that London City Lionesses want to go, to become a big team and become a leader in this league. If you want to become a big team, you want big players of course. Every day, in every training session, we improve because we train with top-class players. For me, it's good, because I like to push myself every day because if you push, you improve and you can play like you want. For me, it's good. I'm not scared about the competition. I'm very excited to go to training every day and show all I can do. It's good for me, it's good for the team.

You were born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, so what did it mean to you to watch their men's national team do so well at the recent World Cup in North America?
I'm very proud. The DR Congo men's team did very good things in this World Cup and in the Africa Cup of Nations before. Yes, I'm proud, I believe in that team. Of course, I support them, I watched the World Cup games on TV. It was nice.

You have played for France for nine years now, including at two home tournaments (the 2019 Women's World Cup and the 2024 Paris Olympics), but have still to reach a major final. What is missing to make that last step and win a trophy?
It's a very good question! I think we need to continue to work. Yes, we have big players but it has not been enough to win a trophy. We want to continue and we hope that one day we can win something.

What are your main goals for this season with London City Lionesses? Should they be aiming for a trophy or is qualifying for next season's Champions League the priority?
Both are possible. Let's get it!

Interview by Asif Burhan

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THE SHARK

Ferran Torres has been written off for most of his career, but in 2026 he proved his doubters wrong

Words: Nick Bidwell

Assured of a prominent place in Spanish football history after slamming home the extra-time winning goal in the 2026 World Cup final, *La Roja* supersub Ferran Torres, 26, has carried on in the same cloud nine vein since completing a €50 million switch from Barcelona to European kingpins Paris Saint-Germain in August.

With seven goals in his first six games for his new club, including a Champions League hat-trick against Slovan Bratislava, the versatile two-footed forward could not have wished for a more satisfying start to life at the Parc des Princes – a perfect riposte to those who assumed he would have to play second-fiddle to PSG's extra-terrestrial frontline trident of Khvicha Kvaratskhelia, Ousmane Dembele and Desire Doue.

Torres, a native of the small town of Foios, a few kilometres north of Valencia, did not sign a five-year contract with the French and European champions to watch from the sidelines. He came to be a top of the bill contributor, looking to push on from his epoch-defining Stateside intervention.

What beggars belief is that Torres has spent much of his career, both at club level and with the national team, as a trusty back-up, only to be called on in an injury emergency or as a rotation option.

During a 16-month spell at Manchester City after joining from boyhood club Valencia in summer 2020, he struggled for regular playing time. He was also often the nearly man during four-and-a-half seasons at Barcelona, starting only 11 Champions League matches and 78 in La Liga. Likewise, 29 of his 66 senior appearances for Spain have come as a substitute.

The Spanish press, ever eager to whip up a polemic, have not been kind to him in recent years, with many of his performances for Barcelona and Spain arousing the ire of the critics. Regularly in the eye of the storm, he has needed broad shoulders and thick skin, frequently critised for inconsistency, missing easy chances and generally being unworthy of both the national team colours and the €55m transfer fee paid by Barca. When it comes to Ferran, the naysayers have a blind spot; many simply cannot comprehend what coaches see in him.

The 106th minute of the World Cup final, the moment he punctured Argentina's street fighter resistance with a ▶

7

PSG star...Torres celebrates completing his hat-trick against Slovan Bratislava in the Champions League

Instant impact...Torres opens his Ligue 1 account v Rennes

deadly swish of his left boot, did not merely deliver Spain's second global title. For Torres this was his very own Independence Day, a much-welcome liberation for the long-suffering media whipping boy.

In the eyes of *La Roja* coach Luis de la Fuente, who previously worked with Torres for the Spanish Under-18s, Under-19s and Under-21s, the all-purpose attacker was at last receiving his due.

"It made me very happy that Ferran scored the winner in the World Cup final," De la Fuente told the sports daily *AS*. "I'm a guy who tries to be fair. I could see injustice and unfounded and exaggerated criticism, some of it, with bad intentions. Life does give you the opportunity to hit back. Ferran has put up spectacular numbers in the national team and has done the same at club level."

Torres is no slouch by any means when it comes to putting the ball in the back of the net. A tally of 25 goals in 66 appearances for Spain is a record to be proud of and in the last two seasons at Barcelona he was on the scoresheet 40 times in 94 games. Not bad for an impact sub, his first-team prospects limited by the presence of a certain Robert Lewandowski in the *Blaugrana* attack.

De la Fuente – who twice gave the captain's armband to Torres earlier this year – went on to compare Ferran's mental toughness under pressure to another long-serving Spain striker who also seems to generate excess media antipathy.

"I am reminded a little of Alvaro Morata," remarked the coach. "I'm glad when people are able to respond to injustice and fight back with a 'Here I am' cry. He totally deserves this moment. Others would have given up the ghost."

Labelled a prodigious talent in his formative years with Valencia, Torres has had many hurdles to surmount in his career, some self-induced, others twists of fate beyond his influence.

> "*El Tiburon* (The Shark) is a mindset I created from falling down and then getting up again"
> **Ferran Torres**

Leaving the Mestalla Stadium in Valencia for Manchester City at the age of just 20 was arguably a case of too much too soon. On joining Barcelona midway through the 2021-22 season, he promptly

Key coach...Luis de la Fuente delivers some instructions to Torres at the World Cup

found himself on a slippery downward slope, destabilised by the weight of expectations at Camp Nou and Spain's shock early elimination from the 2022 World Cup, a penalty-shootout defeat to Morocco in the last 16.

Shorn of the *joie de vivre* and fearlessness of his Valencia days, he often looked a lost soul at the Catalan club, imprecise, tentative and clearly running on empty confidence-wise. In a clash with Atletico Madrid in January 2023, his frustration boiled over, sent off following an undignified scrap with Atleti defender Stefan Savic, the pair rolling around on the floor like wrestlers.

"I didn't want to believe that I wasn't well," he explained in an interview on the *Wild Project* podcast in November 2023. "I knew that things were off-kilter, that I wasn't training so much and just killing time. I felt as though I'd fallen into a bottomless pit and didn't know how to get out of it. I'd lost confidence in myself and my way of playing."

He finally came to the conclusion that drastic action was required and began a programme of consultations with a sports psychologist, a move which would, in time, strengthen his mentality, hone his priorities and ultimately enhance his career prospects.

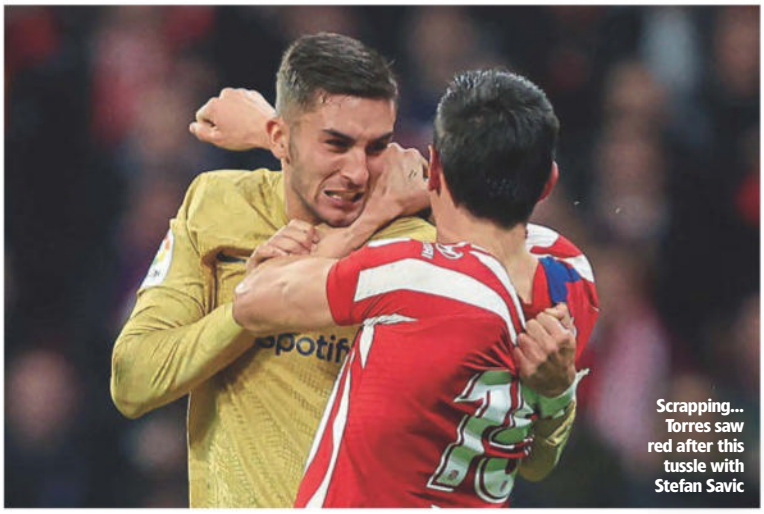
"*El Tiburon* (The Shark) is a mindset I created from falling down and then getting up again," he explained on the *El Hormiguero* TV programme. "I learned not to pay attention to what was said externally, to just work in silence and to realise you don't have to play the full 90 minutes to be the most decisive player in a game. I don't read the press at all. I don't care what they say about me. I know myself when I've done well and when I haven't.

"I know the sacrifices I've made to get here. I focus on what I can control. I focus on the positive. What's changed for me is the way I see things. Now I'm much more self-confident."

Thanks to this fresh perspective to his craft, his form for Barcelona picked up considerably. Although still behind Lewandowski, Raphinha and Lamine Yamal in the pecking order, when given an opportunity, he grabbed it with both hands, proving particularly impressive in the 2024-25 season, scoring 19 goals in all competitions and creating a further seven.

Apart from a couple of spells on the sidelines with hamstring trouble and appendicitis, that campaign was Torres at his most irrepressible, memorably

Baby faced... Torres in his early days at Valencia



Scrapping... Torres saw red after this tussle with Stefan Savic

Hat-trick specialist... Torres marks another treble

Big influence... Torres spent 16 months under Pep Guardiola's tutelage

netting a super-sub brace in a 3-2 Champions League victory in Dortmund, plundering a first-half hat-trick in a 5-0 away win over old club Valencia in a Copa del Rey quarter-final and then saving Barca's bacon in the final of that competition against arch-rivals Real Madrid, his late equaliser forcing extra-time, with Barca eventually prevailing courtesy of Jules Kounde's winner. Ferran was deservedly named Man of the Match.

A fortnight later, he was the star turn of another *Clasico* encounter with Real Madrid, laying on three of his side's goals in a thrilling 4-3 come-from-behind win. Often excellent when deputising for Lewandowski, Torres' contribution to Barca's league-cup double in 2024-25 was immense.

"It's important that everyone shows their best," retorted Barcelona coach Hansi Flick when asked to comment on Ferran's three goals against Valencia in the domestic cup in February 2025. "Ferran's performance was especially good. As a No.9 it matters that you score goals and he fulfilled that role tremendously. I'm happy he got his hat-trick. It's amazing because he's not had an easy time of late, out with injury early in the season. I'm so happy for him."

While not quite so dazzling last term, he was hardly a blunt instrument in the box, ending up with 21 goals in 49 competitive appearances, including 16 in La Liga, a more than respectable contribution to Barca's conquest of back-to-back league titles. Indeed, he was the club's joint-top scorer in the league alongside Yamal.

> "As a No.9 it matters that you score goals and he fulfilled that role tremendously. I'm happy he got his hat-trick"
>
> Torres' former manager Hansi Flick

Strange how someone so often decried for alleged profligacy in front of goal has made a habit of hat-tricks. Back in November 2020, he netted three times for Spain in a UEFA Nations League tie against Germany and recorded another treble in a 5-3 La Liga victory at Betis last season, while Premier League watchers will remember the hat-trick salvo he completed for Manchester City in a 4-3 away win at Newcastle United in May 2021, the highlight a wondrous aerial backheel.

"He is so young and clinical," gushed then-City boss Pep Guardiola at the end of the Newcastle game. "He is a guy brought up as a winger but maybe we have to look at him as a striker. He's a good player."

That 2020-21 season, his one and only full campaign in the English game, proved a mixed affair for Ferran, who after a strong start in the Premier

World Cup-winning goal... Torres sweeps home Spain's final winner

> "That goal was for 47 million Spaniards"
> **Ferran Torres on his World Cup final winner**

League as a replacement for the injured Gabriel Jesus and Sergio Aguero, then fell victim to COVID in January and struggled to leap back into the saddle. On the scoresheet in three consecutive Champions League ties in the autumn of 2020, he only played for ten minutes in the knockout phase, mere bench-fodder as City marched to the final, where they were surprisingly beaten by Thomas Tuchel's Chelsea.

Guardiola's assessment of the young Spaniard's attitude left no room for ambiguity: "Players, like teams, are not a stable situation," declared Pep. "They have ups and downs. Ferran was in an incredible mood when he arrived here, then was sad and upset about many things and that's why he didn't play so well. When he changed his mind, when he opened up and started to smile again, he started playing well again.

Spanish hero... Torres with the World Cup trophy

"Football sometimes depends on the mood and confidence of the players. We try to help them, but it depends on them. You can complain or you can move forward all the time, and football rewards the guys who are positive. When you complain all the time, other guys will take your place. Football doesn't wait. If you're not in the right moment, another guy will take your position. When you are positive, you always play well."

The Ferran Torres of today is much more resilient, much better equipped to roll with the punches. No player in Spain's World Cup 2026 squad received more brickbats than him. But not once did he let the media hysterics divert him from his path. Therapy supplied him with a routine based on perseverance and how it paid off for him in New Jersey this summer.

"All the goals I missed at the World Cup built towards the winner in the final," he said with a smile on the *El Hormiguero* TV show recently. "I came in for a lot of criticism, but if I've learned anything over the years, it's that whenever they talk about you, you're doing something big. That serves as motivation. Fate was written and made for me. That goal was for 47 million Spaniards. I felt the strength of them all."

Ferran Torres

BARCA-PSG RECORD TRANSFERS

€222m	NEYMAR (2017)
€50m	OUSMANE DEMBELE (2023)
€48.5m	FERRAN TORRES (2026)
€8.2m	DRO FERNANDEZ (2026)

FIFA WORLD CUP FINAL MAN OF THE MATCH AWARDS

- 2010 ANDRES INIESTA (Spain)
- 2014 MARIO GOTZE (Germany)
- 2018 ANTOINE GRIEZMANN (France)
- 2022 LIONEL MESSI (Argentina)
- 2026 FERRAN TORRES (Spain)

SPAIN

66 CAPS

25 GOALS

SPAIN'S TOP SCORERS

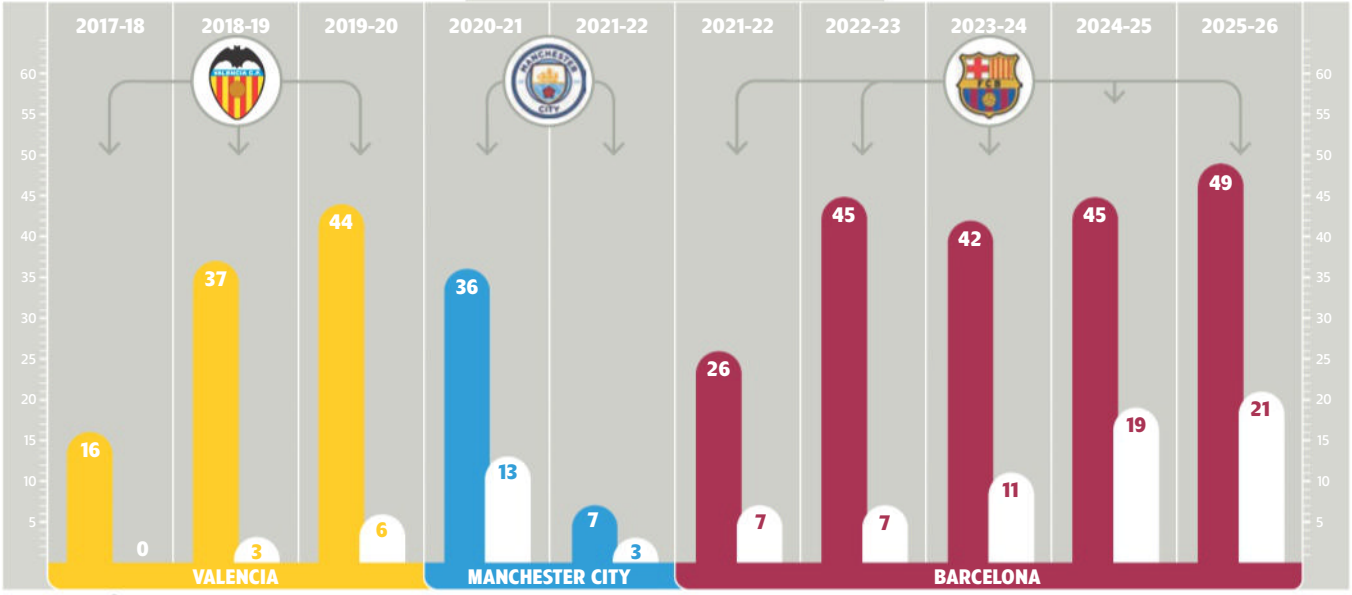
PLAYERS	Goals	(caps)
1. David VILLA	59	(98)
2. RAUL	44	(102)
3. Fernando TORRES	38	(110)
4. Alvaro MORATA	37	(87)
5. David SILVA	35	(125)
6. Mikel OYARZABAL	31	(64)*
7. Fernando HIERRO	29	(89)
8. Fernando MORIENTES	27	(47)
9. Emilio BUTRAGUENO	26	(69)
10. Ferran TORRES	25	(66)*

(Correct as of October 7)

LA LIGA WONDERKID

1

Torres was the first player born in the 21st century to play in La Liga



Betis boy...Parrott celebrates scoring for his new club

THE RISE OF TROY

After years of loans and learning in a variety of leagues, the Irish striker is starting to deliver on his potential

Words: Mark Sanderson

Like fellow striker Harry Kane, it would appear Troy Parrott needed to leave Tottenham Hotspur to find his very best form. Not because Spurs failed him, but because his development required experiences that could not be gained in North London alone.

Now at Real Betis, Parrott's career is continuing its upward trajectory. After scoring the only goal of the game in a victory over Real Madrid, managed by his former Spurs boss Jose Mourinho, and then announcing himself on the Champions League stage with a winner against Lille, he has been an instant hit in the green-and-white side of Seville.

The move to La Liga took the 24-year-old Irishman to his eighth club. What might appear a nomadic path has in reality been a footballing education that helped mould the intelligent, adaptable striker.

Parrott was barely through the door at Spurs as a 15-year-old before the Kane comparisons began. For most young players, that's an impossible standard to live up to. Although in this instance, the parallels do have some substance.

As a grizzled veteran of more than 500 appearances in the English Football League, Adam Barrett knows that better than most. The ex-defender was in Leyton Orient's back four in 2011 when a teenage Kane joined the club on loan and then, nine years later, coached 18-year-old Parrott at Millwall during the striker's first loan move away from Spurs.

"It was their attitude and application that stood out," Barrett explains. "I'm not saying I knew Harry would go on to become England's all-time record goalscorer, but you could see he would have a very good career. He was always willing to do extra work after training. I saw similar traits in Troy."

Although only 18 and yet to play for Spurs, Barrett still recalls a level of hype and expectation around Parrott's arrival at the New Den. He understood the initial challenge facing the young striker.

"There is a huge jump from Under-21 football into the Championship. The pace, physicality and decision-making are all so much quicker, but he was always willing to push himself," he says. "He'd stay behind, work on getting his shots away quicker – he was desperate to score goals."

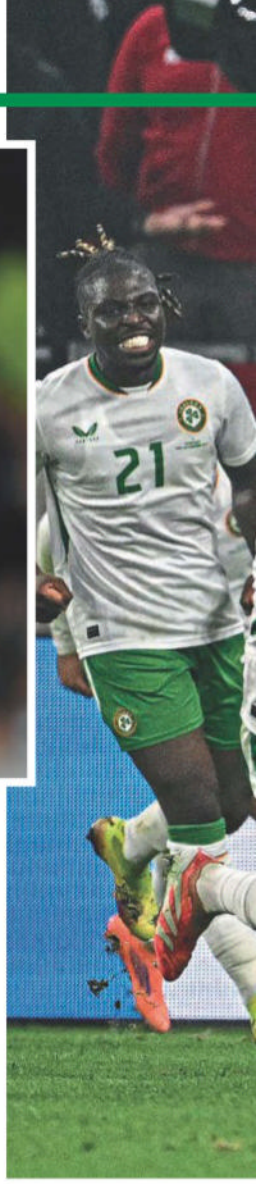
What impressed Barrett was the willingness to do the unseen work, searching for marginal gains long before he had established himself as a senior player.

The numbers say that Parrott's loan spell at Millwall was a failure. Disrupted by injury, he failed to score in 14 appearances for the club and was recalled by Spurs midway through the season. But Barrett sees it very differently.

"Loans are about development," Barrett says. "You're suddenly competing with and against

Learning curve...Parrott spent five months on loan at Millwall during the 2020-21 season

Comparisons...Parrott played alongside Harry Kane on his Premier League debut for Spurs



Breakthrough moment...Parrott celebrates after completing his hat-trick v Hungary

seasoned professionals every day. Understanding that environment is a huge part of becoming a player."

Having started the 2020-21 season at Millwall, Parrott finished it at Ipswich Town, where he scored his first senior goal, before accumulating further EFL experience across the next two campaigns with MK Dons and Preston North End.

At 6ft 1in, he possesses the frame of classic Irish centre-forwards like Niall Quinn and Tony Cascarino. Yet his game has always been built on movement, combination play and spatial awareness rather than physical domination. Even as a teenager, he looked more comfortable creating angles, finding pockets of space and linking attacks than simply occupying centre-backs.

Parrott's various loan moves provided exactly that, exposing him to different styles of football, different demands and expectations. Then, in 2023, his footballing education took him beyond England, with a loan move to Excelsior Rotterdam that proved transformative.

Dutch football has long prioritised technical and tactical intelligence, qualities that had always sat at the heart of Parrott's game. Yet his breakthrough did not come from becoming a different player. If anything, it arrived when he simplified his approach.

Reflecting on his earlier loan spells, Parrott has admitted he often dropped deep in an effort to showcase his all-round game and influence matches. At Excelsior, he became much more focused on occupying dangerous areas and trusting his instincts inside the penalty box.

The results were immediate. Parrott scored 17 goals in all competitions during his first season in the Netherlands, the most prolific campaign of his career to that point. Although it was not enough to help keep Excelsior in the Eredivisie, it marked a significant step in his development.

Parrott's journey also offers a wider lesson about modern striker development. Young forwards are increasingly encouraged to become complete footballers, capable of pressing, linking play and operating between the lines. Valuable qualities though they are, they can sometimes come at the expense of the ruthless penalty-box instincts that separate good forwards from elite goalscorers.

> "He just had this instinct. He always seemed to know what to do in front of goal"
>
> Parrott's former team-mate Adam O'Reilly

Developing strikers is uniquely difficult because many of the qualities that matter most cannot be fully learned in academy football. Timing runs against experienced defenders, finding space in crowded penalty areas and finishing under pressure are skills that can only be sharpened through senior football experience.

It may help explain why genuine goalscorers are becoming increasingly scarce despite greater investment in player development and more sophisticated academy systems than ever before.

In many ways, Parrott's progress came not from adding something new, but from rediscovering the most important part of his game.

Football often searches for a single moment when a future star reveals himself, a sporting equivalent of King Arthur drawing Excalibur from the stone. Yet those who played alongside Parrott as a teenager struggle to identify a single moment to reveal what he would become. In fact, it was not until his vital goals at the end of the 2026 World Cup qualifying campaign last November – a brace v Portugal and a hat-trick v Hungary a few days later – that he truly announced himself on the biggest stage.

Derry City midfielder Adam O'Reilly played alongside Parrott at Republic of Ireland youth level and remembers a player with unwavering self-belief and an unusually natural understanding of centre-forward play, but no dramatic turning point.

"Growing up there were a few lads who were going to be world beaters, but in football it doesn't always work out," says O'Reilly. "It's hard to describe, but he just had this instinct. He always seemed to know what to do in front of goal."

More than anything else, perhaps that was the clue.

It was enough to convince AZ Alkmaar to pay Spurs a reported fee of £6.7 million for him in 2024, and the return on their investment was

emphatic. Across two seasons, Parrott scored 51 goals in 95 appearances. He helped AZ reach back-to-back Dutch Cup finals, scoring in both and winning the second, while also netting a Europa League winner against Spurs and a hat-trick in a demolition of Ajax.

By the summer of 2026, his performances had increased his value sufficiently for Real Betis to splash out a reported £17m for him.

Did Parrott become a different player in the Netherlands? Or did Dutch football simply help him become the player he always was? The evidence points towards the latter. Rather than transforming Parrott, the Eredivisie helped reveal him. The movement, intelligence and technical quality that had always underpinned his game were given an environment in which they could excel.

Dutch football did not reinvent Parrott. It taught him how to maximise the qualities he already possessed. Those qualities drew praise from Rafael van der Vaart, a former Spurs player himself and one of Dutch football's most demanding pundits, who has described the Irishman as a "gem" and a striker who "has everything."

Parrott's development offers a reminder that the pathway for young strikers is not always linear. English football often places enormous emphasis on academy production lines, yet Parrott's progress was accelerated not by remaining in one environment but by experiencing many. Each move exposed him to new demands, ultimately producing a more complete player.

First silverware... Parrott scored for AZ in last season's Dutch Cup final win

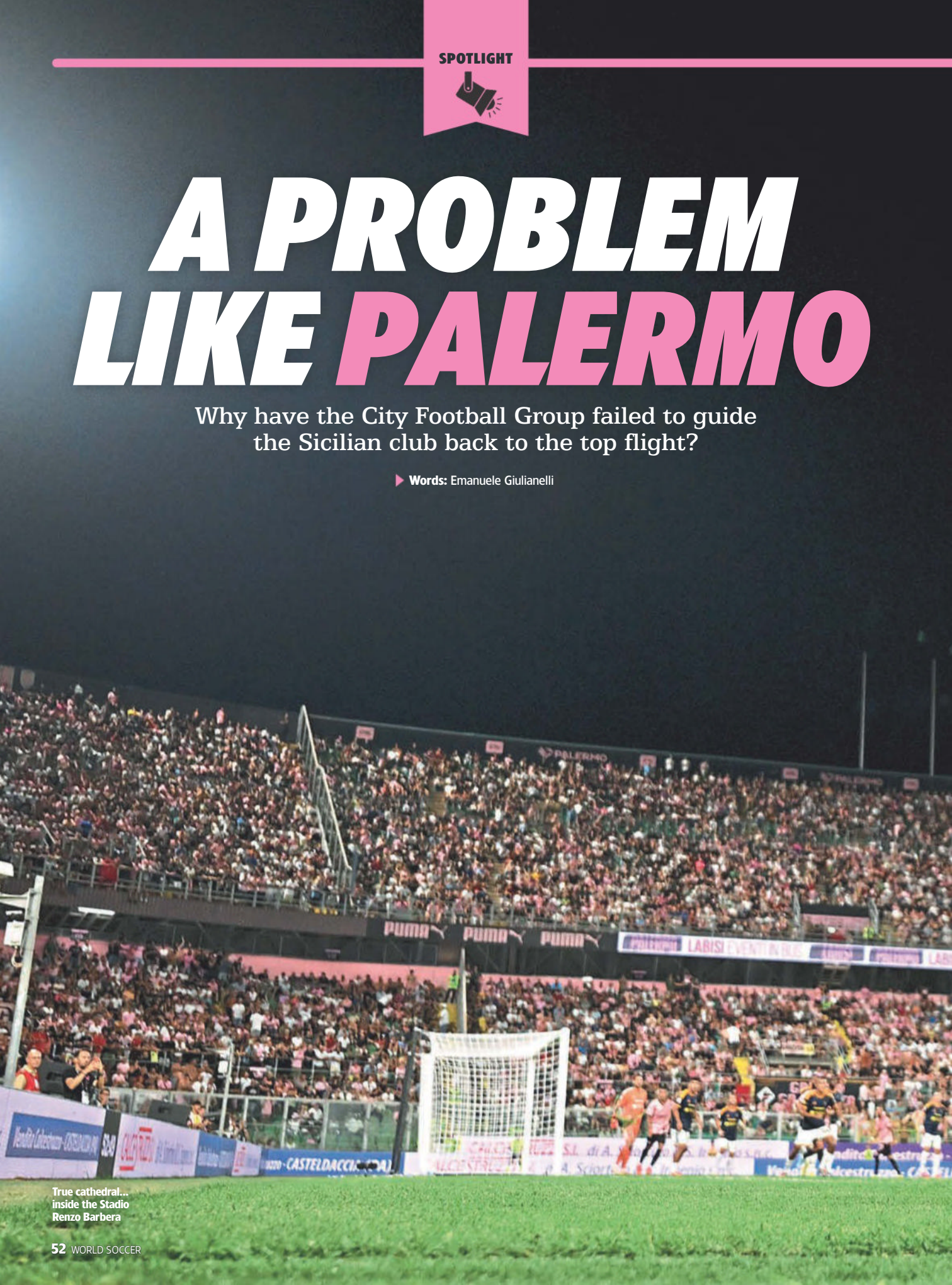
His career suggests that, for centre-forwards at least, development is often better served by exposure to different football cultures, coaching ideas and competitive environments than by remaining within a single system. The modern academy can provide the foundations, but the final stages of a striker's education may still need to be learned elsewhere.

For years, Parrott's career was judged by where he wasn't: in Spurs' first team. Now, with goals in Europe, success in the Netherlands, a growing reputation in La Liga and an increasingly important role for the Republic of Ireland, the focus has shifted to where he is. And the journey that once appeared uncertain now looks increasingly like the making of him.

A PROBLEM LIKE PALERMO

Why have the City Football Group failed to guide the Sicilian club back to the top flight?

Words: Emanuele Giulianelli



True cathedral... inside the Stadio Renzo Barbera

In amongst the fallout from the charges brought against Manchester City, it was easy to forget that the Premier League club shares its owners with a whole network of teams from around the globe under the City Football Group (CFG) umbrella. Each of them would have been watching the events unfold with a fair dose of anxiety, wondering how City's guilty verdict would affect them, but perhaps none more so than Palermo FC.

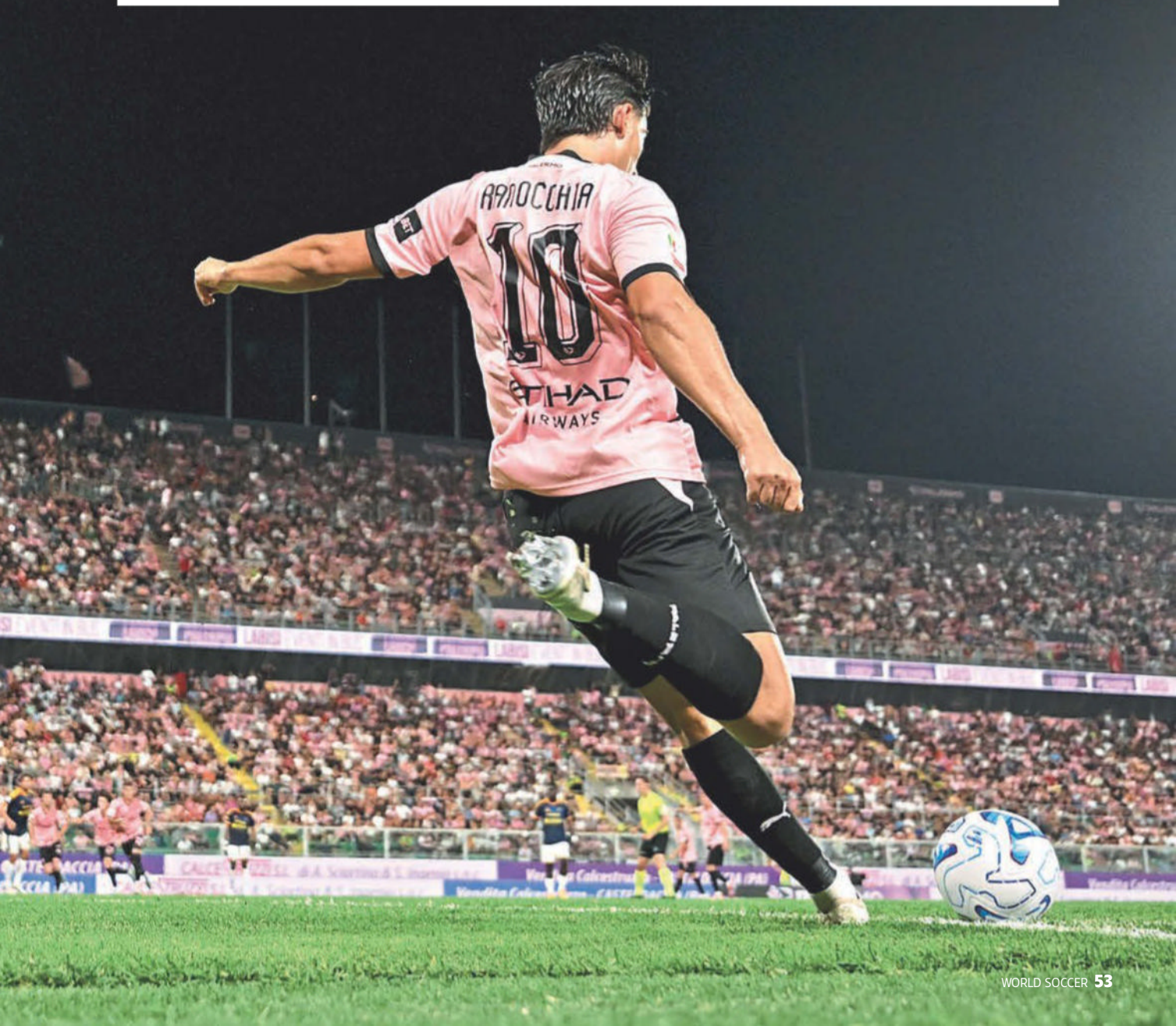
The Sicilian club has seen its fair share of turbulence over the years, but now finally seem to be facing in the right direction, thanks in no small part to their Abu Dhabi owners.

While Melbourne City and New York City bear the closest likeness to the Manchester flagship, and Girona have played Champions League football in the very recent past, Palermo could arguably claim to have the highest ceiling of any of the 12 CFG clubs.

Palermo is a city where you can breathe football in the thick air of the historic markets of Ballaro, Capo, and Vucciria. It is an urban ecosystem made of visceral sounds and penetrating smells: the cries of the street vendors, the incessant frying of panelle and arancine in boiling oil, the chaotic traffic, and the deafening roar that, on matchdays, rises from the Stadio Renzo Barbera, the club's home since 1932, a true concrete cathedral nestled at the foot of Mount Pellegrino.

And then there are the colours: pink and black. When the club adopted these shades at the beginning of the 20th century, they were dubbed the colours "of the sweet and the bitter". Pink for the intoxicating sweetness of victory; black for the bitterness of defeat and the scars of a city that has had to learn to survive everything.

Yet, Palermo doesn't merely belong within the physical borders of the Sicilian capital. It is a team that travels in the suitcases of history, carried along by millions of Italians who emigrated around the world in search of fortune and a future throughout the 20th



century. Today, huge communities of *Rosanero* supporters exist in New York, New Jersey, Toronto, Buenos Aires and the industrial cities of Northern Europe. Every week, generations of the diaspora tune in to watch Palermo in action.

It was this global fanbase that attracted CFG. In July 2022, the multi-club ownership group acquired an 80% stake in Palermo (later increased to 94.94%). It was an epochal shift for a club that, just three years earlier, had declared bankruptcy and been forced to restart from the amateur depths of Serie D.

The man who saved them from oblivion was Dario Mirri, a local advertising entrepreneur and the nephew of legendary former president Renzo Barbera, after whom the stadium is named. Retaining a minority stake and the role of president under the CFG umbrella, Mirri has proved to be a vital part of the modern club.

"There is always Mirri, who represents the unifying link," Stefano Sorrentino, a former goalkeeper and Palermo captain between 2013 and 2016, tells *World Soccer*. "He is Palermitano: he's a fantastic person who holds everything together."

From a structural standpoint, the impact of CFG has been positive; the club's problems are certainly not financial anymore. They have built a centre of excellence in Torretta and have plans for a new stadium, which was proposed as a venue for Euro 2032 to be co-hosted by Italy and Turkey. It has an estimated total cost of around €380 million, featuring heavy direct investment from the club and its shareholders, alongside regional and municipal public funds. The new stadium will have a capacity of roughly 40,000 seats, with construction slated to begin in June 2027 and full operations expected by February 2030.

Yet, despite the enormous financial solidity of a group that has already invested around €280m in the club, making that final leap to return to Serie A has proven a difficult hurdle to clear.

For much of their history, Palermo have yo-yoed between the first and second tiers, but in 2004 they won promotion to Serie A and stayed there for nine years, their longest spell in the top flight. Relegation in 2013 was followed by an instant return, winning Serie B and spending three more years among Italy's elite.

Throughout this time, Palermo fans saw their fair share of stellar talent, with the likes of Luca Toni, Edinson Cavani, Josip Ilicic, Javier Pastore and Paulo Dybala all making their names on the island before moving on to bigger and better things.

Those days seemed like a distant memory when the club were demoted to Serie D in 2019, but they recovered to return to the second tier by 2022, just before the change of ownership.

Serie B is a gruelling league, where nothing can ever be taken for granted and pre-match predictions are often proven wrong – especially when it concerns matches involving the favourites for promotion.

The first two years of CFG's ownership were about becoming established in the second tier. Silvio Baldini, the manager who had led them to promotion, stepped down following the takeover. Baldini's successor, Eugenio Corini, secured a mid-table finish in his first season but ultimately could not find a way to promotion, and neither could Michele Mignani or Alessio Dionisi.

The perceived failure of these managers was their inability to handle the unique pressure of Palermo and the demanding fans; for all its merits, playing at the Barbera can be a double-edged sword.

"It's a stadium that pushes you hard, and clearly you need to have the personality to handle it," says Sorrentino.

> "The Palermo shirt is heavy. Being a Palermo player is beautiful, but you must have a certain mental strength"
>
> Former Palermo captain Stefano Sorrentino

"The Palermo shirt is heavy. Being a Palermo player is beautiful, but you must have a certain mental strength".

The supporters are also fully aware of this.

"Going to the Barbera is an intense experience and you always start with a one-goal advantage, even if you aren't playing well," says Giancarlo, a lifelong *Rosanero* supporter. "But to handle that shirt, you need character. If you don't have it, the pressure crushes you."

In response, ahead of the 2025-26 season the club appointed a head coach who had built a playing career on staying composed under pressure: Filippo Inzaghi. The former Milan, Juventus and Italy striker had just guided Pisa to promotion, but rejected a tilt at Serie A in favour of taking the reins in Palermo.

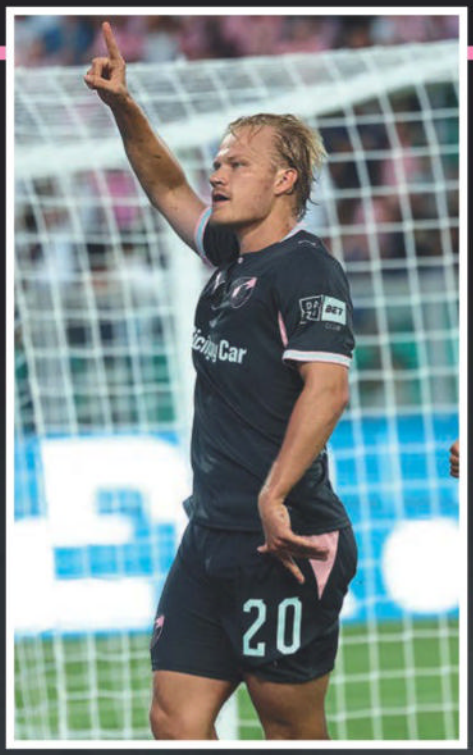
Last season, he led them to fourth place and the play-offs, where they lost 3-2 to Catanzaro over two legs.

"It's not a given that just because Manchester City is behind you, you take to the pitch and win games, absolutely not," Sorrentino warns, dismantling the illusion of a financial shortcut. "There's a process; you have to build a mentality.

"I think Inzaghi is the right man to take Palermo back to Serie A," he concludes.

The squad has been significantly strengthened and built with much more logic. Former Juventus and Italy keeper Mattia Perin arrived in August, competing for the No.1 shirt with Mattia Fortin, on loan from Lens, and Finland international Jesse Joronen, who's currently out with a dislocated shoulder. The defence also boasts solid Serie A experience, with Federico Barba, Pietro Ceccaroni and Mattia Bani complementing Tommaso Cassandro, signed from Como after starring in Serie B for Catanzaro last season. In midfield, Claudio Gomes is a graduate of Manchester City's academy and winger Gabriel Strefezza has made a positive impact since arriving from

Loyal fans... Palermo players celebrate after beating Lecce in the Coppa Italia this season



The Viking...Palermo's prolific striker Joel Pohjanpalo

High-profile manager...Filippo Inzaghi

Olympiacos for €4m, while 20-year-old forward Dominic Vavassori has been tipped as a future Italy international. He, along with Alessandro Gabrielloni and Dennis Johnsen provide back-up for Finland striker Joel Pohjanpalo, who topped the Serie B scoring charts last season with 24 goals.

"When you have players like Perin, Bani, [midfielder Jacopo] Segre and the Viking [Pohjanpalo] up front, these are players who could comfortably be regular starters in Serie A and perhaps even sit in the top half of the table," says Sorrentino.

With a squad of this calibre, the time for excuses and pleading for more time is over. "If we don't go up to Serie A this year, the responsibility will lie solely with Inzaghi," says Giancarlo.

The early signs have been very promising, with Inzaghi's men sitting top of the table after five games with 13 points. But they know as well as anyone that nothing can be taken for granted in Italy's second tier.

FROM BRAMALL LANE TO BEIJING

Former Sheffield United midfielder Nick Montgomery on a coaching journey that has taken him to Australia, Edinburgh, a Europa League final and now China

Words: Michael Butterworth

When Nick Montgomery walks out at Beijing's Workers' Stadium, the surroundings are very different from those in which he began his coaching career. More than 60,000 supporters can pack into the Chinese capital's imposing arena, where giant tifos and green flags greet one of the country's best-supported clubs.

Yet Beijing Guoan's English head coach has been here before.

Montgomery's connections with Chinese football stretch back two decades. During his long spell at Sheffield United, the club developed strong links with China, taking control of second-tier Chengdu Five Bulls in 2006 and renaming the club Chengdu Blades. United also signed several prominent China internationals during that period, including Hao Haidong, Li Tie and Sun Jihai.

His connection with Guoan was more direct. Montgomery faced the Beijing club during his subsequent playing career with Central Coast Mariners, so he had experienced Chinese football from several angles by the time the opportunity to coach in Beijing arrived.

"As soon as [sporting director Matthias Brosamer] mentioned Beijing Guoan, I remembered playing against them in the AFC Champions League," Montgomery tells *World Soccer*. "It was a midweek game on a Tuesday night in the old Workers' Stadium with 40,000 people there.

"I'd always followed Chinese football. There was a Chinese connection with Sheffield United. We had a pre-season in China as well."

Leeds-born Montgomery's return to head coaching continues a career that has rarely followed the obvious route. After making more than 400 appearances for Sheffield United, he moved to Australia in 2012, initially as a player with Central Coast Mariners. He subsequently joined the coaching staff and took charge of the first team in 2021.

Working with one of the A-League's smallest budgets, Montgomery built around young players and an aggressive, attacking style. The culmination came in 2023 when the Mariners overwhelmed Melbourne City 6-1 in the Grand Final to win their first championship in a decade.

"I won the league in Australia with the youngest team on the lowest budget," he says. "We were one of the best pressing teams, and we scored more goals than anyone in the league that season."

It was an achievement that opened the door to the UK and three months after winning the title, Montgomery left Australia to take charge of Hibernian.

But his return to British football proved considerably less successful. Hibs finished outside the Scottish Premiership's top six and Montgomery was dismissed in May 2024 after eight months in charge.

The former Scotland Under-21 international insists that he enjoyed his time in Edinburgh, but felt let down in what he thought was going to be a project of rebuilding. "There were big differences in what I wanted to do at the club and what I was promised," he says.

If Hibernian represented the first major setback of Montgomery's coaching career, the response took him to the other end of British football. Within weeks, Ange Postecoglou brought him to Tottenham Hotspur as his assistant manager.

The appointment reunited two coaches whose careers had been shaped by Australian football and whose ideas about how the game should be played had considerable overlap. Montgomery, though, is keen to stress that his commitment to pressing and attacking football predated his time with Postecoglou.

"I've always been a high-pressing team," he says. "That's why Ange

Unveiling...Nick Montgomery inside Beijing Guoan's impressive Workers' Stadium

A-League winner ...Montgomery celebrates with his Central Coast Mariners players

wanted me to come and work with him at Tottenham, to try to win a trophy.

"Ange is a great guy and I've always admired his football principles. I see a lot of the stuff I do as very similar, especially after working with him."

Spurs' Premier League campaign was turbulent, with injuries contributing to a 17th-place finish in Postecoglou's second and final season, but Europe provided vindication. Spurs beat Manchester United in Bilbao to win the 2025 Europa League, ending a 17-year wait for a major trophy and securing their first European silverware since 1984.

For Montgomery, it provided an emphatic response to his disappointment in Edinburgh.

"To do that when a lot of big-name managers failed was amazing," he says.

Their partnership continued after Postecoglou left Spurs, with Montgomery following him to Nottingham Forest. It proved a short-lived reunion, however, as Postecoglou's eight winless games in charge brought his spell at the City Ground to an abrupt end.

Montgomery nevertheless remains an admirer of a coach whose commitment to attacking football attracted criticism during a difficult final season at Tottenham Hotspur.

Was Postecoglou's approach simply unsuited to the Premier League? "Not in the slightest," Montgomery says. "The reality is there were so many injuries at Tottenham that season. But I admired the way that they continued to play. They had a lot of young players."

> "A lot of people are scared to go abroad. You have to be brave to go to a different country as a foreign coach. Especially English managers, not many go overseas"
>
> **Nick Montgomery**

Now at Al Nassr in the Saudi Pro League, Postecoglou remains in regular contact with his former assistant.

"He follows what I'm doing here as well," Montgomery says. "He's been really impressed with what I've done at Guoan.

"We still speak. He sent me a nice photo of his sons with Cristiano Ronaldo. I've met some fantastic people in football and he's one of them."

Postecoglou is only one of the managerial influences Montgomery identifies. At the opposite end of the stylistic spectrum stands Neil Warnock, who gave the midfielder his Sheffield United debut.

"What he instilled is that real fighting mentality and that belief to compete," Montgomery says. "I still speak to him now and then as well, so he's definitely a strong influence on me. His man-management was one of the best I've ever come across."

After Spurs, Montgomery had choices about where to rebuild his own managerial career. He says he received interest from England and Europe, while his success in Australia had previously attracted attention from clubs in China, Japan and Thailand.

Then came the call from Beijing.

"I spoke with Matthias and we spoke about the club and the vision of how big the club is, the process of rebuilding the

ABOVE: Tough spell...Montgomery managed Scottish side Hibernian for eight months

ABOVE LEFT: Key influence...Neil Warnock with Montgomery

team, and that excited me," he says. "Things progressed and it was quite quick. I was on an aeroplane about two weeks after the first phone call, from London to Beijing."

The scale of Guoan was part of the attraction. The club is among the traditional heavyweights of Chinese football, although they haven't won the league since 2009. Montgomery inherited an ageing squad and a lengthy injury list, while Chinese football itself bears little resemblance to the lavishly funded Chinese Super League he had watched from afar a decade earlier.

"The finances are not what they were in the league many years ago, so we have to be smart in terms of recruitment," he admits. "Right now, the club's in a rebuilding phase and I enjoy building teams. This season, we've built a really strong culture and foundation."

While the 2026 CSL title is probably beyond them, Montgomery's first season has produced encouragement. Guoan won the Chinese FA Super Cup in his first competitive game and put together a lengthy unbeaten run. They have also returned to Asia's leading club competition after a five-year absence, opening their 2026-27 AFC Champions League Elite campaign with a 3-1 home victory over South Korea's Pohang Steelers.

His preferred approach remains familiar: "Competitive, aggressive, high pressing, dominate with the ball, score goals. All the things everybody wants to do, but that's the way I see football."

Implementing it in China has required adaptation. Training and playing through Beijing's hot summer is one consideration; communicating through interpreters is another. Montgomery says the latter has actually forced him to become more precise.

"You have to adapt," he explains. "In group meetings you have to speak slowly, with less speaking than probably you would if everybody understood English."

The willingness to adapt has become a theme of Montgomery's career. England was home for most of his playing days, but Australia transformed him from player to coach. Scotland provided disappointment, Spurs a European trophy, and China has now given him another opportunity to build a team of his own.

He believes more British coaches should be prepared to make similar leaps.

"A lot of people are scared to go abroad," he says. "You have to be brave to go to a different country as a foreign coach. And especially English managers, not many go overseas.

"I just see different experiences and opportunities to go and try to win some trophies in different countries. When I'm retired, I'll look back with great memories of different challenges and not just staying in the same place."

That does not mean Montgomery has abandoned ambitions closer to home. Asked whether managing in the Premier League remains an ultimate goal, his answer is immediate.

"I'd be stupid if I said I don't want to manage in the Premier League," he says. "I have had offers in England, but didn't feel it was the right time."

For now, his focus is Beijing. Montgomery lives in the downtown district of Sanlitun, within sight of the Workers' Stadium, and his family has visited him in the Chinese capital. The ground that he first encountered as an opposition player has become the centrepiece of the latest stage of a career spent taking the road less travelled.

"I think it's as good as anywhere in the world," he says of the newly renovated Workers' Stadium. "When you see our supporters, the tifos, the flags, and 65,000 people packed in, it's a really special place.

"Who knows where I'll be in the future? But right now, all I'm concentrating on is doing the best I can for Beijing Guoan."

Assistant coach... Montgomery assisted Ange Postecoglou at Spurs and Forest

KELLYN ACOSTA

"When I was in the States, some people didn't even know there was a professional soccer team – here, people know me"

The American midfielder discusses a new chapter in his career starring for Polish side Pogon Szczecin, compares MLS and the Ekstraklasa, and talks about getting back into the United States national team setup

What made you realise it was time to leave the United States for the first time?
I enjoyed my time in MLS, and I was on the fence when this opportunity arose. I wouldn't say I was content, because I obviously want to achieve more, but this opportunity to play here in Poland was something I wanted to explore. I thought: "This might be a good time for me to make the jump and experience something that's different and unique that I wasn't doing before and fulfil a dream." I've always talked about playing overseas in Europe, and at that moment in January, I had the opportunity to fulfil that.

How would you compare the Ekstraklasa with Major League Soccer?
It's a very good league: there are some great teams and very good players, and there are very difficult games all throughout. There are some teams that play good football, and some physical teams that have different attributes.

There's a lot of individuality in MLS that makes some of the teams more dynamic than others, players like Lionel Messi, Denis Bouanga and Evander. But here, it's more of a collective effort. At any point, anyone can beat anyone at any time, and it's crazy to see so many 90-plus-minute goals. You can't switch off here, from the first minute all the way up until the 99th, because there are goals at any point in time, and the game can turn on its head.

I'm really enjoying the league. I'm still learning as I go, but it's been good, especially being part of the league from the start of the season rather than the second half like I was last year.

Have there been any cultural shocks in a footballing sense?
[The Ekstraklasa] is a very physical league. It's intense, it's aggressive, it's a game of details, whether it's from set-pieces, long throws. There are a lot of clever players. Not just clever with the ball, but without the ball, how they are able to push you off balance to draw contact. There's a cleverness to the game. It's hard to break down teams in this league because a lot of teams defend very well, and it's very hard to create opportunities.

The biggest part is the fanbases. The fans play a pivotal role of the environment of the game. Like the game that we just played in [a 2-0 win over Wieczysta Krakow]. It might not have been the prettiest of games, but our fans were loud, and they were proud, and they were yelling, and they were chanting, and it helped push us to get that goal. And when we scored that goal, they were on fire. It was amazing to see. And when we travel, we travel heavy. And to have that feeling of support...you don't necessarily feel that [within MLS].

There were about three months between playing your final game for Chicago Fire and joining Pogon Szczecin. Did you have any other teams that you were considering, and what swung the pendulum in Pogon's favour?
Pogon was something that came to the forefront just based on the unique opportunity and the president and the coaching staff pursuing me. When you have a team that wants you, you really take that into account. That was part of the reason why I went to Chicago [in 2024], because of their active talks with me daily, trying to get me to come there. As a player, you want to go somewhere where you're wanted, not where you're tolerated. That was the biggest thing. I had some other options within MLS, but this one was just based on how Pogon were with me: they made me feel very comfortable.

How important is it for American players to go abroad at least once in their career?
It's difficult to say, because everyone has different goals, dreams and ambitions, and I can't really say it's a mandatory thing. But to experience something that's out of your comfort zone – not just on the field between ➤

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Maiden goal... Acosta celebrates after opening his Ekstraklasa account in August

the white lines, but off the field – it's helped me mature and see a totally different culture. And taking in some adversity throughout the way has helped me grow a lot, and it's helped me develop a new perspective that I probably wouldn't have ever achieved if I was playing Stateside. I think playing abroad brings out unique circumstances in all of us, and it just helps you explore a different side of your game. As I mentioned before, I was comfortable in MLS; I knew what to expect, I knew all the teams and players. But coming into a new league where I knew basically nothing is its own feat. It's very difficult, in a sense, but it's been great to learn about Poland as a whole, as well as the league and players, and get a different perspective on what world football and European football are like.

What has it been like going from a country like the United States, where black people

World Cup 2022... Acosta attempts to tackle Wales icon Gareth Bale

Ex-Chicago Fire... Acosta challenges Rodrigo De Paul of Inter Miami

National team regular...Acosta made a record 21 appearances for the US in 2021

constitute 15% of the population, to Poland, where it's 0.02%?
I never really viewed it like that. Obviously, when I look around, I don't really see a lot of people that look like me. And if I do, they're probably my team-mates, or they're on the local basketball team. You don't really see too many black people – that's one shock. It's not like I feel awkward or weird by not seeing black people, because I'm even more recognisable here than I would be Stateside. Everyone in the city loves and knows Pogon, and people know right away that I play for the team, which is a blessing and a curse, in a way. It's obviously unique because people recognise me and say: "Good luck on the weekend," or they ask for a picture or an autograph, which is a cool feeling to know that people know who you are, they're invested in the team and want to see the team succeed and win.

What's been your favourite thing about playing for Pogon?
When I first arrived here, I didn't fully grasp what Pogon was as a team. Now I have a better understanding of what Pogon means to the city, and what the city means to me. Szczecin is not the biggest city, but everywhere you go, everyone knows what Pogon is. And to have that feeling that people will spend their last zlotys going to a game to watch us perform, it's a lot of responsibility.

When I was in the States, if I walked down the street and asked people about the [Chicago] Fire or [Colorado] Rapids, some people didn't even know there was a professional soccer team there. We would be out in gear, and they'd think I'm on a high school baseball team. Here, I don't even have to wear gear, and people know me. It's super cool to see what the team means to the city and have the opportunity to play, to not only showcase my talents, but also just be an ambassador for the club and to make them proud on a bigger level. That's a super cool feeling.

> "As a player, especially when you were able to achieve a lot of great things with the national team, you always want to be back in the fold"

What was it like being able to play at the 2022 World Cup?
The World Cup is the pinnacle of sport, all sports. For me, it was a dream come true, something that I've always wanted to achieve. It was cool to see it up close, and kind of eye-opening to see guys that I've watched on TV and being a foot away from them, competing against them, battling against them, to compare and see how I measured up to them.

What was your overall take on the US's World Cup campaign in 2026?
As the tournament went on, the excitement just kind of compounded and compounded and compounded. Seeing all the games, and people wearing the jerseys, and being talked about – it was cool. It was cool to see my friends and family really invest into the sport at a different level. I thought it was a great tournament. It was cool to see some good football on display. It shows that we have made some progress, we have a lot more room to grow, and we'll continue to grow. But the first part is believing we can go toe-to-toe with the world's best. We showed that at times. And the next step is continually doing that and executing on a consistent level.

Are you hoping to get back into the national team setup?
As a player, especially when you were able to achieve a lot of great things with the national team, you always want to be back in the fold and have the aspirations to get back there. But for me it's been some years without playing for the team, and it's obviously a difficult journey to get back in. I'm not ruling it out completely, but I know I have a lot of work to do, especially here at Pogon. First and foremost, I've got to do it at club level. Make some noise, have some good performances and do well. If I hone in on that, anything can happen.

Interview by Zach Lowy

RYAN WILLIAMS

"Every time an immigration lawyer told me it was impossible, it made me more determined"

The Australian-born forward had to sacrifice a lot to make his debut for India. Now he's determined to play a big part in the Blue Tigers' future

You were born in Australia and earned one cap for the Socceroos back in 2019. Why did you switch your international allegiance to India, the country of your mother's birth?
I got injured after making my debut and it took a bit of time to get back to full fitness. The manager had to look for a replacement, who took his chance and kept his place in the team. I was hoping to get another opportunity but then COVID came along. By the time we returned to normality, the focus of the management had moved to other players.

I still had the ambition to play at international level. As I've grown older, I've become more connected to my Indian heritage. Since signing for Bengaluru [in 2023] and living in the country, I've become even more attached. I was aware that this route was an option. I also had a team-mate, Sunil Chhetri, an icon of Indian football, encouraging me to find a way to make it work.

As dual nationals are not allowed to represent India, you had to give up your Australian passport to secure Indian citizenship. How big a decision was that?
It's not an easy process. There wasn't anyone I could get advice from. There were times I wanted to give up, but my wife and wider family were there to support me. Every time an immigration lawyer told me it was an impossible task, it made me even more determined to see it through. You can imagine the reaction from consular officials when I'm telling them I want to give up not just my Australian passport but my British one too. They would look at me as if I had just come down from another planet.

We put out a video on social media when it was made official and I was truly humbled by the response. India is a very diverse country. If being in the team lets people look at Indian football differently and it opens the door for others, then that's a positive.

You scored on your official debut against Hong Kong in an Asian Cup qualifier in March 2026...
I was actually due to make my official debut against Bangladesh [in November 2025] but the necessary clearance hadn't arrived in time. You can tell from my celebration what it meant to me both personally and professionally. My [maternal] grandfather played for Bombay in the 1950s. After all this time his grandson goes on to score for the national team. Even talking about it now, it's very emotional.

There are several players of Indian origin particularly in the UK who could potentially follow your footsteps. What advice would you give them?
I have spoken to some of them and I'm happy for others to reach out. What made it easier for me was that I was playing in the ISL [Indian Super League]. My circumstances allowed me to bring my family to India. One of the criteria when you apply for citizenship is having stayed in the country for 12 months, which wasn't an issue for me. However, not everyone will get an opportunity to sign for an Indian team. Some may not be able to move their family halfway across the world. Everyone's circumstances on and off the pitch are different.

Do you think the current laws should be changed to allow the All India Football Federation (AIFF) to utilise the talent of the Indian diaspora around the world?
There were three or four players with Indian roots at the World Cup. Sarpreet Singh of New Zealand being the most well known. If the option was there, earlier in their careers, they may have chosen to play for India. Looking ahead to the future there are a number of youngsters at Premier League academies. As they grow older and progress it would be good for them to have a choice.

However, it would be wrong to assume that just because you have played in Europe, you would walk into the starting XI. Don't underestimate the quality that exists here. Just because you add some overseas players, doesn't necessarily mean we will immediately qualify for major tournaments. They must be good enough. If their inclusion improves the team, then in the medium-to-long-term, it's a big step in the right direction.

There has been talk of offering sporting passports, which would make it easier for [elite] overseas athletes to represent the country. How far those discussions have gone and to what level, that's a question you need to ask the Indian government.

In the current national team setup, only yourself and goalkeeper Gurpreet Singh Sandhu have played outside of India. How important is it that Indian players are exposed to playing outside of the country?
I've come across this opinion that Indian players prefer to stay in their "comfort zone" of the ISL, because they get paid well and play week, in week out. I wouldn't say that's the case. They would want to test themselves in different environments. The issue is getting a work permit. The criteria is very strict.

There has been talk about a 64-team tournament for the 2030 World Cup finals. What are your thoughts on another expansion?

Every four years the question is asked: "Why isn't India at the World Cup?" This year comparisons were made between India's population [1.5 billion] to the likes of Cape Verde [530,000] and Curacao [185,000].

I would love to give you a time frame because it would give the game such a boost. It would attract new supporters, investors and funding, which could be put back into grassroots. Also, given that there are Indian communities all over the world, no matter where the tournament was held, we would have such amazing support.

I'm all for any proposal that gets us there, but adding more teams doesn't make it easier to qualify. For India to reach the World Cup and hold their own, we need to be winning regional tournaments, qualifying for the Asian Cup regularly, and eventually we need to become one of the top ten teams in Asia.

The ISL will return on October 10 with a 13-team league after last term's campaign was delayed and shortened. How important is it that there is no further disruption to the nation's leading division?

It was an extremely frustrating and worrying period. As players we are not involved with the running of the game. I can't make any comments about other clubs, all I can tell you is that I'm happy and relieved. When the ISL does well then it benefits the entire Indian football industry.

Interview by Imran Azam

ABDULLAH IQBAL

"I want to play at the highest level"

Pakistan's captain discusses the team bouncing back from a decade of bans, working with Nolberto Solano, and life with Swedish champions Mjallby

You were born in Copenhagen to Pakistani parents. At international level you represent Pakistan, but was the country of your birth an option?
I was never called up or involved at youth level for Denmark. When Pakistan made contact, I couldn't refuse. It's an honour to play for and captain the team. You can just imagine how my parents feel.

There is a large Pakistani community in Denmark. Players from here have been involved with Pakistan, even before my time. When I was called up, I was around familiar faces.

You made your Pakistan debut under Shahzad Anwar, were made captain by Stephen Constantine and now the coach is Nolberto Solano. What impact did they all have in developing your game?
Shahzad would encourage me to build and play out from the back. I appreciate him for introducing me to international football.

Stephen was your old-school style British coach. He believed that as a central defender my first responsibility was to clear the danger, become a no-nonsense defender. It was a case of finding the right balance. We created history with him when we beat Cambodia [Pakistan's first-ever World Cup qualifying win], which led to games against Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Tajikistan. Although we lost all three matches, it was still a sign of progression. It's very rare for Pakistan to come up against such quality. Even in defeat, you still learn. Two of those teams were at the World Cup.

With Nolberto it's the first time I have been with a coach who played at the highest level. When he asks you to do something, he looks at it from a players' perspective.

In June, Pakistan won the Diamond Jubilee International Football Tournament. Has the country moved on from the turmoil that saw three FIFA bans imposed on the Pakistan Football Federation, between 2017 and 2025?
Having no football in Pakistan for almost ten years was a big setback at every level. It will take time to put structures in place. For the federation to promote the sport to sponsors and broadcasters, it's very important we have a functioning league. It gives players a purpose. It gives the youth a reason to choose football over other sports, as they know they have a platform they can aspire to.

It's great to be playing on a regular basis for the national team. You can see the improvements in performances and results. Winning a trophy for your country is a big achievement, especially given the issues we have had in the past.

The media attention that came our way was good for our profile and the sport generally. It brings awareness to the Pakistani public that their senior team is active and winning.

The South Asian Football Federation (SAFF) Championship will be played in Bangladesh in November. At the last edition in 2023, Pakistan exited with three group-stage defeats, including a 4-0 loss to rivals India. Are you confident of making amends?
When it comes to SAFF, we are up against teams of a similar level. Any player will tell you when you enter a tournament you want to go as far as you can. It's a good mix of games.

Any match with India has an added edge. Losing by such a scoreline in front of their supporters definitely hurt. We weren't helped by our preparations, and I will leave it at that. This time it's at a neutral venue and we are in a much better place.

At club level you played a crucial role in Mjallby's historic success in winning the 2025 Allsvenskan. How did a club based in a small fishing village win the Swedish league title?
We played good attacking football. We won with three games to go and a record 75 points. You can't compare us to the likes of Malmo, AIK and Hammarby. Their fanbase and revenues are on a completely different scale. It's a cliché, but it was a case of taking it one game at a time. When you have a young team, you play without fear.

The number of foreign journalists attending home games just kept on increasing. The club did well to keep us away from the outside noise. They didn't want us to get caught up in the hype.

Even if another team reaches those levels, given our resources, you will always look back on what a special achievement it was.

Why have you struggled this season to reach the same heights?
When you have success, it comes to the attention of others. It wasn't just the league we won for the first time, we won the Swedish Cup too.

Some of the players have moved on and it hasn't been easy to replace them. Even though we are the champions, our budget is very small. The club want to develop young players. It's the correct approach but it takes time.

Another first for you and Mjallby has been European football. How have you found that?
We were expected to beat Lincoln Red Imps [in the Champions League second qualifying round] and we did. Slovan Bratislava were better, although I felt both games were pretty even. The difference was that extra quality in some individual players.

We have the Conference League and there are some big teams in there. We are being exposed to different styles and ability, which you don't always see in Sweden. It's all about learning and developing.

You've been linked with clubs in Europe's top five leagues. How do you deal with the speculation?
I take it as a compliment. It keeps you motivated to keep on improving. I do want to play at the highest level, and I've been public on that. I'm not able to control the timings of any move, I will leave that in Allah's hands.

If I'm able to play my part in creating a pathway and advancing the game for other Pakistanis, then I'm more than happy to do so.

Interview by Imran Azam

Credit: Alamy

GREECE

It has been 12 years since Greece took part in a major international tournament. But with a new generation of exciting young players, change is afoot…

On the evening of Sunday, October 11 2015, Greece were coming off a hard-earned 4-3 victory over Hungary at the Karaiskakis Stadium in Piraeus. But no one was celebrating the result. It was the final game in a brutal qualifying process for the team, one that had began with them as top seeds yet saw them finish bottom, below Finland and the Faroe Islands, with Northern Ireland topping the group.

Those Euro 2016 qualifiers spelled the end of an era for the Greeks. Having reached five of the previous six major tournaments, they found themselves cast to the side of the international game. Players like Angelos Charisteas, Theo Zagorakis, Giorgos Karagounis and Stelios Giannakopoulos, heroes of their stunning victory at Euro 2004, had retired, and no one had risen to take their places.

Greek football was too busy dealing with the power struggle of its four major clubs – Olympiacos, Panathinaikos, AEK Athens and PAOK – and those in charge of them to bother with the promotion and nurturing of any hopeful talents.

Fast-forward a little under 11 years, and the Greeks once again staggered off the pitch following a victory – but this time without any hint of disappointment. While much of the focus was reserved for Jurgen Klopp losing his first home match in charge of Germany, Greece basked in their first-ever victory over

UEFA Nations League clash…Greece players line up in Germany

Famous goal... Dimitrios Kourbelis scores the winner against Germany

the European heavyweights, with midfielder Dimitrios Kourbelis' goal proving to be the difference.

It was a result that validated the growing excitement and confidence in Greek football. After a summer in which over €150 million was spent on Hellenic players, the evidence is becoming clearer: an exciting new generation of talent has emerged.

It is a growth emerging from two sources: Greek clubs themselves, and the wider diaspora.

The Greek Super League has often valued expensive and experienced imports, but in recent years major clubs – most notably Olympiacos and PAOK – have started to redevelop their youth teams, investing heavily in scouting networks, improving their training facilities and expanding their youth academies.

For PAOK, as well as winning the league in 2023-24, the rewards have been financial. Of the six most expensive Greek players of all time, three – Christos Tzolis (now at Arsenal), Stefanos Tzimas (Brighton) and Giannis Konstantelias (Dortmund) – came through their youth ranks. While not all of those transfers were direct sales for the club, with sell-on clauses taken into account, their academy graduates have brought close to €100m into the club's coffers.

Olympiacos have also turned a profit on academy graduates, cashing in on the likes of Charalampos Kostoulas (Brighton), Christos Mouzakitis and Konstantinos Tzolakis (both to Hull

Key win...Greece players celebrate during their 2-1 win over Serbia in September

Landmark win... Dimitris Giannoulis, Konstantinos Karetsas, Christos Tzolis and Vangelis Pavlidis during the March 2025 victory over Scotland

City). But their greatest youth success was their Under-19s winning the UEFA Youth League in 2024. Both Kostoulas and Mouzakitis were involved, the latter on target in the final, while goalkeeper Tzolakis was in team for the senior side when they won the Conference League a month later. So too were Panagiotis Retsos and Andreas Ntoi, other recent graduates who have gone on to become Greece internationals.

There is still work to do. With an average age of 26.8, the Greek top flight is still one of the oldest in Europe, but the culture is slowly changing.

Other players have come into the national team set-up from further afield.

The financial crisis that struck Greece in the late 2000s forced many young families to migrate throughout the world. After the failure to qualify for the 2018 World Cup, the federation set out to bring some of that diaspora back to the national team. Vangelis Pavlidis, who moved to Germany and came through Bochum's academy, debuted in 2019. More recently, former Norway youth international Christos Zafeiris and Australian-born Nectarios Triantis have come into the national team fold.

The poster boy for the policy, though, is Belgian-born teenager Konstantinos Karetsas, who joined Dortmund from Genk in the summer and at 18 already has 14 caps. Regarded as one of the most exciting talents in Europe, he, along with Tzolis, Kostoulas and Pavlidis, form a thrilling attacking unit.

What separates this generation from the one that famously carried Greece to Euro 2004 is not just its potential but the level at which many of its youngest players are already operating. Kostoulas, Tzolis, Konstantelias, Karetsas, Mouzakitis, Tzolakis and Konstantinos Koulierakis are all playing in top-five European leagues, and all before the age of 25.

Add in the likes of Liverpool left-back Kostas Tsimikas (a Premier League winner), Benfica striker Pavlidis (one of the most prolific goalscorers in Europe) and Como forward Tasos Douvikas (who didn't miss a Serie A game last season), and Serbian coach Ivan Jovanovic has a squad rich in talent and experience.

And there should be much more to come. In July 2024, Makis Gkagkatsis was elected president of the Greek Football Federation (EPO), with further youth investment his top priority.

With the help of various UEFA development programmes, the EPO announced an overhaul of grassroots football named "*Anagennissi*" (Rebirth).

In an interview with UEFA, Gkagkatsis said: "The programme is an investment in the future of Greek football. We want to move from theory to practice and create a unified and permanent philosophy of development, starting from the younger ages. The aim is not to wait for talents to appear, but to create the conditions for them to develop properly."

> "The aim is not to wait for talents to appear, but to create the conditions for them to develop properly"
> **Greek federation president Makis Gkagkatsis**

Since Euro 2004, Greek football has been waiting for lightning to strike twice. But now, building on the momentum of an exciting new generation, Gkagkatsis is trying to build foundations that can not just take Greece to the next couple of major tournaments but make them a permanent fixture on that stage.

A new training ground, Paiania, which was modelled on England's St George's Park and France's Clairefontaine, has been built on the outskirts of Athens, with the national team moving in last year.

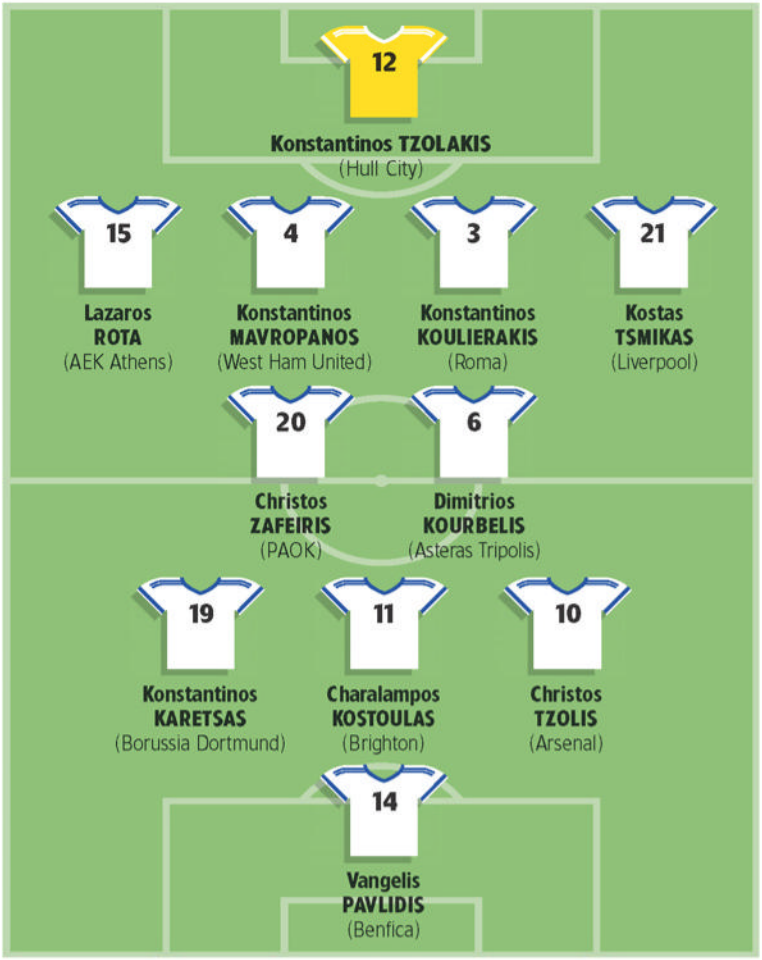
The *Anagennissi* plans also outlined a footballing DNA for the country, based on a compact defence, fast transitions in attack and a fighting spirit.

Redefining a nation's football identity doesn't happen overnight, and there was a lack of defensive robustness during 2026 World Cup qualifying. Greece finished third in their group behind Scotland and Denmark, conceding 12 goals in their six games.

Losing out to the Scots was a particular point of frustration given that they had beaten them 3-0 in Glasgow during the 2024-25 UEFA Nations League play-offs.

That victory was not just a landmark

BEST XI



moment for an emerging young group of stars – the starting XI's average age at Hampden Park was just 22.7 – it also ensured their place in League A for the 2026-27 campaign where they have continued to impress. In addition to the 1-0 victory in Germany they also held Klopp's side to a 0-0 draw at home, alongside a 2-1 win in Serbia and a 2-2 draw with the Netherlands.

In December, they will find out their opponents for the Euro 2028 qualifiers, and might even be drawn from Pot 1, granting an easier route to the finals.

For Greek fans, the days of waiting for their team to return to football's biggest stage are almost over. For the first time since the generation of 2004 faded away, there is genuine evidence that the foundations are being laid for something more lasting.

Alex Anyfantis & Jamie Evans

Greece head coach ...Ivan Jovanovic

THE COACH

Ivan JOVANOVIC

This is the second international role of the Serbian's coaching career, having been appointed by the United Arab Emirates at the end of 2019 – although to describe that job as underwhelming would be an understatement; he departed after just 106 days without overseeing a single match due to the COVID pandemic.

The 64-year-old has known moments of success in his career, winning four Cypriot titles with APOEL and reaching the UEFA Champions League quarter-finals in 2012, and winning the Greek Cup with Panathinaikos in 2022. He's also recorded a few head-turning results with Greece, including a 2-1 victory over England at Wembley.

Jovanovic came under scrutiny after failing to qualify for the 2026 World Cup, but he bounced back in the 2026-27 Nations League, claiming eight points from four games against Germany (twice), Serbia and the Netherlands. He may yet guide Greece to their first major tournament since 2014.

STAR PLAYER

Christos TZOLIS

Despite only turning 24 earlier this year, Tzolis' career has already seen plenty of ups and downs.

A product of PAOK's academy, he moved to Norwich City in 2021 but struggled to make his mark in the Premier League for the newly promoted side. After underwhelming in the Championship the following season too, he was tasked with rebuilding his career out on loan, first with Twente in the Eredivisie and then, in 2023-24, with German side Fortuna Dusseldorf.

Scoring 24 goals in 35 games caught the eye of Belgian giants Club Brugge, where he continued to shine. In two years he registered 43 goals and 45 assists in 108 games, firing them to the title last season. In July, Arsenal paid £34m to sign him.

Tzolis usually starts on the left wing for Greece, from where he dribbles inwards, utilising his pace, technique and powerful right foot. He is quickly becoming Greece's talisman, as he demonstrated in September with a clinical left-footed finish against Serbia that inspired a come-from-behind 2-1 win.

THE ONE TO WATCH

Konstantinos KARETSAS

Born and raised in Belgium as a child of Greek migrants, Karetsas is a product of the Genk football academy that produced the likes of Kevin De Bruyne, Thibaut Courtois and Leandro Trossard. Having won 20 Belgium youth caps, he was the subject of an international tug-of-war as a teen, before opting for the country of his parents.

In March 2025, he made his debut against Scotland in a Nations League play-off, scoring in the return leg a few days later to become his country's youngest-ever goalscorer.

Like Tzolis, Karetsas is usually deployed as an inverted winger when on international duty, cutting in from the right onto his left foot, though his long-term future may be more central. His nimble footwork and bursts of acceleration not only make him a nightmare for opposition full-backs, but a joy to watch for the fans – as does his energy and work-rate.

In the summer, Bundesliga giants Borussia Dortmund signed him for €30m alongside his fellow Greek wonderkid Giannis Konstantelias, who damaged knee ligaments on his Bundesliga debut. The pair, though, represent the future for both club and country.

Mexico

League FOCUS

2026 Apertura action...Pumas UNAM clash with Leon

2026-27 TEAMS

- America
- Atlante
- Atlas
- Atletico San Luis
- Cruz Azul
- Guadalajara
- Juarez
- Leon
- Monterrey
- Necaxa
- Pachuca
- Puebla
- Pumas UNAM
- Queretaro
- Santos Laguna
- Tigres UANL
- Tijuana
- Toluca

LIGA MX – A BRIEF HISTORY

Mexico's professional league began in 1943. Guadalajara's success in the 1950s and 1960s established a national following, while America's rise helped create a rivalry that became the country's – and the continent's – biggest club fixture.

The championship adopted end-of-season play-offs in the 1970s and split into two annual tournaments in 1996. Those changes made knockout football central to the domestic game: finishing first sometimes brings advantages, but the title still has to be won after a knockout stage called Liguilla, which allows for surprise champions and constant Cinderella stories. Fifteen of the current 18 Liga MX teams have secured a title in their history.

THE FORMAT

Eighteen clubs contest the Apertura, followed by a separate Clausura championship. Each plays 17 regular-season matches, with the leading eight advancing to each tournament's quarter-finals. The Liguilla then decides the champions through two-legged knockout-round ties. There is no match between each tournament's winners, and both are considered champions. Cruz Azul began the Apertura 2026 as reigning champions after beating Pumas UNAM in the Clausura final. There used to be one promoted and one relegated team from the second tier with increasingly complicated rules. The system was discontinued in 2020 creating an uproar that lives on in present times.

HONOURS BOARD

Club	*Title wins*	*Runners-up*	*Last title*
America	16	11	2024 Apertura
Guadalajara	12	10	2017 Clausura
Toluca	12	8	2025 Apertura
Cruz Azul	10	12	2026 Clausura
Leon	8	7	2020 Guard1anes*
Tigres UANL	8	7	2023 Clausura

**The 2020 Apertura tournament was named Guard1anes 2020 in honour of Mexico's healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic*

What makes Liga MX so watchable?
Several clubs have the money to assemble squads that would be difficult to afford across much of Latin America. Monterrey, Tigres, America and Cruz Azul can offer substantial salaries and compete for established internationals, while Toluca and Guadalajara's spending has helped make them regular title contenders. Mexico's domestic TV market, corporate backing and large following in the United States give its leading clubs considerable purchasing power.

The concentration of resources across several clubs also makes the league difficult to monopolise. Add the play-off system, where one poor evening can undo months of work, and every season there are several potential champions. The format can be unforgiving to the best team over the regular season, but it produces compelling knockout football.

Has the World Cup increased Mexico's appetite for football?
Co-hosting the World Cup brought international football into everyday life, and the 2026-27 Apertura has benefited. Mexico's displays gave the home support something to sustain that enthusiasm. Victory over Ecuador, delivering a first World Cup knockout-round win since 1986, and the celebrations afterwards demonstrated how readily the country could get behind the team again.

For Liga MX, the opportunity is to carry that renewed interest into the domestic season, particularly through players such as Gilberto Mora, whom fans can continue watching every week. The league has an audience coming out of the summer wanting more football.

Is Mora a one-off, or is there more talent coming out of Liga MX?
Guadalajara are certainly doing their bit in terms of player production. Earlier this year, their young winger Hugo Camberos was named Player of the Tournament as Mexico won the CONCACAF Under-20 Championship – ensuring a spot at next year's U20 World Cup – and he and his club colleague Santiago Sandoval have since earned places in Rafael Marquez's first senior squad. Their former left-back Mateo Chavez, who scored at the World Cup, is now playing for AZ, demonstrating both a route to success for other young Mexicans and the talent that can be found in Liga MX to European clubs.

Elsewhere, there is excitement about 16-year-old Juan "Mono" Martinez, who made his Liga MX debut for Queretaro in July and is part of a generation already being tipped for greatness by *El Tri* fans.

ONE TO WATCH

Gilberto MORA

(Tijuana)

Mora already has a wealth of international experience that few Mexican players acquire so young. In June, he became his country's youngest-ever World Cup player, appearing against South Africa, and subsequently started in the knockout rounds. His composure receiving the ball under pressure and his ability to combine in crowded areas have made him an unusually accomplished attacking midfielder for his age. Having just turned 18, he is now eligible for a move to Europe and his choice of club and league is the centre of attention of the Mexican football scene, constantly discussed in TV shows and coffee shops around the country. The word is that he will stay in Liga MX until next summer.

Why was promotion and relegation suspended in Liga MX?
The decision was taken in April 2020, during the pandemic, with the financial survival of second-division clubs central to the argument. The second-tier Ascenso MX was replaced by Liga de Expansion, and promotion and relegation was suspended for six seasons.

Rising star...Chivas' Santiago Sandoval

In reality, it was all an excuse as the decision was mostly driven by financial motives; club owners simply didn't want their vast sums of investment diluted by relegation.

The original agreement has since become the subject of litigation. In September 2025, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) rejected an attempt by six second-division clubs to restore the system for 2025-26, finding that the agreed suspension ran until the end of that season.

Shouldn't the system have returned by now?
That is precisely why the argument has become so bitter. The agreed period expired, but before the start of the season the Mexican Football Federation announced that the promotion-relegation system would be gone for good, leaving all the second-tier clubs in limbo. They have filed a new complaint to CAS and are awaiting a response.

At the same time, pressure is now coming from outside football. The Mexican Senate held a round of discussions with industry leaders to incorporate sporting merit into the obligations of national sports associations, although federation commissioner Mikel Arriola and Liga MX president Francisco Iturbide did not attend. Mexico's National Antitrust Commission has also opened an investigation into possible anti-competitive practices in professional football.

But all these efforts could very well fall short as Liga MX is a private entity, subject to its own rules. Furthermore, the federation has forged a close-knit relationship with FIFA president Gianni Infantino, to the extent of pulling out of the CONCACAF-led bloc that condemned him for the FIFA Forward initiative, thus making him a formidable ally in case the government decides to intervene.

But Atlante are back. How did that happen?
Through the acquisition of Mazatlan's registration. Atlante had won three second-tier titles without being promoted. Their eventual route back required a transaction approved by the first-division owners.

Mazatlan's own place had come from the relocation of Monarcas Morelia in 2020. Within six years, the same top-flight membership had served three different club identities. In Mexico, that's standard practice. As many as nine out of the 18 actual franchises in Liga MX started their lives in a different city, with different names and different colours.

Martin del Palacio Langer

Glenn Moore

Points of difference

The differences from the men's game that once defined women's football have slowly been eroded

A common refrain in women's football is: "We don't have to copy the men's game, we can be different."

For decades it *was* different, as the sport fought to re-establish itself following the half-century long bans imposed by national associations being repealed across Europe and elsewhere in the early 1970s.

Clubs were created, associations founded and competitions developed, all largely independent of national federations, FIFA or UEFA. The wider public was mostly ignorant and when the media took note, it was usually to patronise or scorn. But there were unofficial World Cups in Italy, Mexico and Japan, cup finals on rented pitches and patchwork leagues in which teams folded and reformed on a regular basis.

Gradually strongholds developed. Italy had a semi-professional set-up in the 1980s which attracted foreign players, egalitarian Scandinavia saw the women's game develop quickly, and in the USA the title IX regulation of 1972, forcing colleges to invest equally in men's and women's sport, turbocharged soccer, helped by there being little cultural opposition from the men's game due to its low profile in the States.

Prompted by Norway, FIFA launched the Women's World Cup, after a trial event, in 1991. Except it was billed: "The First FIFA World Championship for Women's Football for the M&Ms Cup" and matches were restricted to 80 minutes. The USA beat Norway in the final.

Ten years later, the first UEFA Women's Cup was launched featuring 33 clubs (from 33 different federations), most of whom were largely unknown to the men's game. The main exception were Arsenal, who also became the only non-independent winner in the opening nine seasons. Italy were represented by Torres, Scotland by Ayr United.

FFC Frankfurt beat Sweden's Umea 2-0 in the final, with the two clubs winning four of the first five editions between them.

Fast-forward to the modern day and the last eight of the Champions League, the successor competition, now looks much like the men's. With Wolfsburg fading, the only regular exception is Lyon, aided by first-mover advantage under former president Jean-Michel Aulas and the subsequent investment of Michele Kang.

Independent clubs like Umea and 2005 winners Turbine Potsdam can only dream of reaching the final, while Frankfurt bowed to the inevitable and joined forces with Eintracht Frankfurt.

It is the same story at international level. With some exceptions – USA's women continue to outperform their men, as do North Korea's, Canada's and China's, while Argentina and Croatia are a long way off their men's teams – the FIFA world rankings look broadly similar across genders with Spain world champions in both. The most obvious difference is that, primarily due to cultural factors, many women's teams from the Middle East and Africa lag behind their male counterparts.

> Many observers believe that women's football has to largely mirror the men's in order to be viewed as "legitimate"

But the plea for difference is intended to run deeper than who wins matches and trophies. Those who play and follow the women's game believe it is more inclusive than the men's and, for want of a better word, "nicer".

Under fire...Chelsea's Katie McCabe came in for heavy criticism from Arsenal fans

Some of this is true. New advocates often cite a lack of diving and play-acting, harking back to how they perceive the men's game used to be, while the women's game is far more welcoming to the LGBTQ+ community, which is not surprising given many of its players identify as such.

But as the sport gets bigger, holding onto that "niceness" is becoming increasingly difficult.

While there is usually no forced segregation in women's games and no overt hostility, "away ends" are now a feature, requested by the supporters. When Arsenal took 3,600 to Chelsea this season their former player Katie McCabe, now at Chelsea, experienced a torrent of abuse.

Online, the discourse on social media can be as vicious as the men's, even when discussing relatively banal topics.

As the stakes get higher, diving, play-acting and even overt violence are creeping in. The recent South American Games final between Venezuela and Chile, and Chile's earlier match with Uruguay were marred by post-match fights between players.

Money talks, and it is being heard as loudly in the women's game as in the men's. Thus, those big men's clubs prepared to invest rise to the top and the independents get squeezed out. It takes an individual with deep pockets, such as Kang, owner of Washington Spirit, London City Lionesses and OL Lyonnes (as she has rebranded Lyon) to match them.

Unrecognisable... FFC Frankfurt were the first winners of the UEFA Women's Champions Cup

Kang is the sport's big disrupter. As befits an American billionaire entrepreneur, she believes there is profit to be made in women's sport, but there is also idealism. She is investing in research into female-specific injuries and focusing more than most on promoting and developing the matchday experience (though Arsenal are the pioneers in this regard).

An outsiders' outlook is valuable as many of the people running the women's game, be they executives, administrators or media officers, have come from the men's side and see things through that lens.

While some leagues have gained a degree of independence, such as the WSL and NWSL, this seems so far to have been aimed as much at opening up sponsorship opportunities as doing thing differently (though there have been initiatives on policies such as maternity leave and similar).

Many observers believe that women's football has to largely mirror the men's in order to be viewed as "legitimate". After all, women's tennis, cricket, rugby, etc. tend to operate within similar structures to their male equivalents.

When something radically new is created, such as World Sevens Football – a seven-a-side tournament that attracts some of the world's biggest clubs during the off-season – no one seems quite sure whether to take it seriously or not, despite the significant prize money. At present this is invitational and outside FIFA, which makes it appear an exhibition event.

In a similar vein, experiments in media coverage using high-profile influencers have been met with mixed reaction. The opening programme in *ESPN/Disney's* Champions League coverage this season also included a golden retriever, for no apparent reason besides its 137,000-strong Instagram following.

Meanwhile, on the pitch, coaches are sacked more frequently, transfer fees are rising, and the game is becoming ever more global – two WSL teams on the opening weekend did not feature a single English player in the starting XI.

Even the NWSL, which like most US sports has safeguards designed to foster competitive balance, has had to adapt with salary cap exceptions made to keep players like Washington Spirit star Trinity Rodman Stateside.

NWSL, unlike major US sports such as the NFL, operates in a global context. And that architecture is built around the men's game. The women's game can tinker around the edges, individuals like Kang can push the boundaries to a degree, but being "different" is proving difficult.

Round-up

Under-20 world champions ...Spain's women celebrate beating North Korea on penalties in the final

SPAIN REVERSE TABLES ON NORTH KOREA

Spain followed up winning the Under-19 European Championship by lifting the Under-20 World Cup, defeating holders North Korea 4-3 on penalties after a goalless draw in Lodz, Poland.

It was a reverse of the Under-17 final between the same teams in 2024, when North Korea won 4-3 on penalties after a 1-1 draw. In total, 12 players started both finals – eight North Koreans and four Spaniards – including Spain goalkeeper Laia Lopez, who made two saves in this year's final shootout, and her Real Madrid team-mate Pau Comendador, who won the Golden Boot in both events.

The dominance of the two finalists was underlined by the fact that their defences proved almost impenetrable. North Korea kept clean sheets in all seven of their matches, while Spain conceded just once, in a 3-1 group stage victory over China.

The third-place play-off also went to penalties, with Colombia defeating Italy after a 1-1 draw.

BRAZILIAN TRIO THE ONES TO BEAT

The Copa Libertadores Femenina kicked off in Quito, Ecuador with the trio of Brazilian entrants likely to produce the winner come the October 31 final. Favourites Corinthians have won five of the last seven editions with Palmeiras the most recent alternative winner, in 2022. The third Brazilian club, Cruzeiro are making their debut.

However, the gap is narrowing. Deportivo Cali, of Colombia, were beaten on penalties by Corinthians in the 2025 final while the only other previous winners in this year's event, Chile's Colo-Colo, went out in the semi-finals after four wins and a draw. The host nation's two representatives, 2024 semi-finalists Independiente del Valle, and LDU Quito, will hope to spring a surprise aided by the 2,850-metres altitude.

Up for grabs... the Copa Libertadores Femenina trophy

CITY AND UNITED NOT RIVALS IN ATLANTA

The first NWSL club in Georgia will be called Atlanta City FC, an interesting juxtaposition with the city's MLS club, Atlanta United, who are also owned by Arthur Blank, the Home Depot store founder, and with whom they will share a stadium. The expansion club, who paid a record $165m, is set to debut in 2028 along with a team in Columbus, Ohio, bringing the league to 18 teams.

Orlando Pride exit...Seb Hines

DOUBLE-WINNER HINES AXED BY PRIDE

Less than two years after leading Orlando Pride to the rare double of NWSL Shield (regular season) and Championship (play-offs), Englishman Seb Hines was sacked with the Florida club sitting 12th in the table. Bottom-of-the table Chicago Stars had earlier fired Swede Martin Sjogren after exactly a year in the post.

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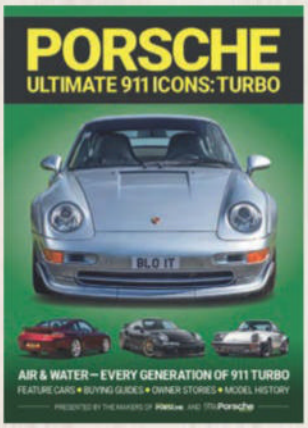

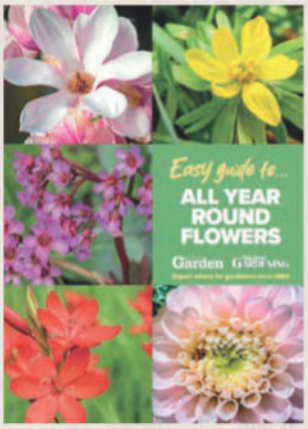

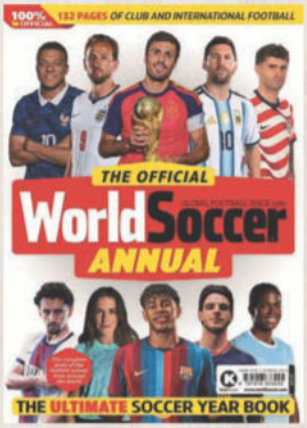

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Europe

NICK BIDWELL

Nations League continues to throw up story lines

The opening exchanges of the 2026-27 UEFA Nations League produced lots of drama – both on and off the pitch

The main headlines from the first four matchdays of the 2026-27 UEFA Nations League – all squeezed into one extended international window – came in League A.

Never mind Jorge Jesus' perfect start as Portugal coach, four wins out of four in Group A4, including impressive away victories in Norway (2-1) and Denmark (4-2) – in these parts, only one story matters at the moment: the trials and tribulations of the iconic Cristiano Ronaldo.

The 41-year-old *Selecao* legend, capped no fewer than 234 times with 146 goals, walked out on the national team after the Norway game, apparently incandescent with the new coach for alleged broken promises.

In a lengthy statement on Instagram, Ronaldo said he had been told he would miss the Norway game, only for Jesus to change his mind and tell him he would play the last 30 minutes. When the veteran striker warmed up and didn't come on in Oslo, he responded by leaving the camp.

Has he sung his last song for Portugal? It's a pertinent question, especially with replacement striker Goncalo Ramos scoring three goals in this window. Ronaldo says he wants to continue but the decision may well be out of his hands.

Elsewhere in the group, Norway keeper Orjan Nyland, a national hero

Wembley showdown... Lamine Yamal scores for Spain against England

Left out...Cristiano Ronaldo warms up during Portugal's game in Norway

In-form striker Sweden's...Viktor Gyokeres scored in all four Nations League games

after saving a penalty in his country's win over Brazil in last summer's World Cup, was left out of the starting line-up in the wake of calamitous gaffes in defeats to Portugal and Wales.

The RB Leipzig shot-stopper could have no complaints after his comedy of errors: the miscued pass that Ramos chipped home for Portugal and his poor positioning when facing a Welsh free-kick, stepping to his left far too early and unable to recover when Neco Williams clipped the ball to the other side. Norway boss Stale Solbakken wasted no time in announcing Nyland's demotion, doing so in the post-match press conference in Cardiff, and turning to Brest goalie Egil Selvik.

Group A2 was fascinating, with a resurgent Greece sitting joint top with the Netherlands after both teams took eight points from the window. Germany sit third, and the decision of new coach Jurgen Klopp to use two distinct squads in this window – one for the 1-1 draw in the Netherlands and 1-0 home defeat to Greece, and another for the 2-0 win over Serbia and goalless trip to Greece – was not exactly to the liking of skipper and midfielder Joshua Kimmich.

"What I can say to say to [Kimmich] is that the more you ask, the less likely you are to get what you want," declared a testy Klopp after revealing that the Bayern man had made several unsuccessful requests to remain beyond his two allotted games.

Criticised in the German media for his display in the Greece defeat, Kimmich could be in danger of losing his place to club team-mate Tom Bischof, who scored on his first start v Serbia.

Elsewhere, when not playing a straight bat to questions about his past as Manchester City manager, Italy boss Roberto Mancini was busy pulling the Italian ship off the rocks in Group A1.

Back for a second spell in charge of the *Azzurri*, Mancini – who led Italy to the European Championship crown in 2021 – clearly knows what he's doing at this level. Although it's too early to talk of a renaissance, home and away wins over Turkey and a hard-earned 1-1 draw in Paris against France point to a vastly improved outlook.

Mancini has made it clear that no one, not even trusty competitors such as Napoli right-back Giovanni Di Lorenzo and Inter midfielder Nicolo Barella, is guaranteed a starting spot. Brentford right-back Michael Kayode and the versatile Sassuolo forward Sebastiano Esposito were the pick of the new faces.

Has Cristiano Ronaldo sung his last song for Portugal? It's a pertinent question, especially with his replacement Goncalo Ramos scoring three goals in this window

In the same group, Zinedine Zidane and Mark van Bommel made promising starts to their first national team posts. Michael Olise was yet again the eye-catcher for France, rescuing *Les Bleus* with last-gaps salvos in both of the wins against Belgium. Meanwhile, *Diables Rouges* impressed under Van Bommel in their other two matches, winning 2-0 in Italy and beating Turkey 3-0 at home.

World champions Spain lead Group A3 and are, alongside Portugal, the only team in League A with a 100% winning record. The pick of their victories was a 3-2 win against England in an entertaining clash at Wembley, but the Three Lions stole the headlines in the group with a 7-0 win in Croatia, inflicting the heaviest defeat in their history. Luka Modric, who was making his 205th appearance and has agreed to extend his international career under Slaven Bilic, admitted afterwards that he felt "ashamed".

Outside the top tier, Switzerland shrugged off the absence of influential captain Granit Xhaka to win each of their opening four fixtures in Group B1. With the 152-capped midfielder unavailable for the autumnal internationals, Milan's Ardon Jashari deputised brilliantly.

One of those victories came against Scotland, whose new coach Sebastien Pocognoli has problems to solve. A 2-0 win in North Macedonia showed promise, but a 2-1 home defeat to Slovenia was humbling. It appears the same old story: a lack of genuine quality in both defence and attack.

In Group B2, Northern Ireland impressively lead a tough pool containing Hungary, Ukraine and Georgia with Michael O'Neill's charges going unbeaten in their first four games. Austria lead Group B3 ahead of Kosovo and the Republic of Ireland, while Group A4 is headed by Sweden, whose striker Viktor Gyokeres proving irresistible in this window, scoring in all four fixtures against Bosnia & Herzegovina, Poland and Romania (twice).

See November and December's Results, Tables, Fixtures section for a comprehensive round-up of all the action from September and October's UEFA Nations League matches

Africa

MARK GLEESON

5 Things...

...from Africa Cup of Nations qualifying

1 CRISIS FOR THE WEST AFRICAN GIANTS

Ghana head coach Carlos Queiroz was the first managerial casualty of the AFCON qualifying campaign after a shock 4-2 home defeat to Gambia, compounded by the fact that the Black Stars were 2-0 up in Accra. They had already lost their opening Group C clash to neighbours Ivory Coast, and a second defeat leaves Ghana in danger of missing out on the Cup of Nations finals for a second successive edition, even if there are four qualifiers still to be played. The veteran coach had quit after the 2026 World Cup but had been persuaded back ostensibly because of player pressure, but they certainly did not show any aptitude in the two contests.

Elsewhere, Nigeria began in Group L with an unconvincing come-from-behind home win over Madagascar but then turned in an awfully listless showing in the heat in Guinea-Bissau to go down 3-0 in an embarrassing setback. The pitch conditions left Nigeria's large Premier League contingent looking scared to commit to tackles and challenges for fear of injury.

Tough times... Cape Verde midfielder Kevin Pina

2 CAPE VERDE FAIRY TALE AT AN END

With head coach Bubista moving on to a job at Moroccan club Renaissance Berkane, Cape Verde were keen to keep continuity and build on the momentum of their stunning World Cup experience and so promoted assistant Humberto Bettencourt to take over. But they could be reconsidering after losing their opening two games in Group K.

The first one was expected, away to a powerful Mali side who claimed a 3-1 win thanks to a Nene Dorgeles brace. But losing 2-1 at home to lowly Rwanda was a sobering setback for the islanders, especially having taken the lead through forward Gilson Benchimol. Now they must beat Liberia home and away in November's next round of qualifiers to get back into the qualifying race. The ageing Cape Verdean side needs freshening if they are to prove more than a one-hit wonder.

3 TUNISIA'S TORMENT COULD SEE THEIR RECORD AFCON RUN ENDED

Tunisia hold the record for successive AFCON finals appearances, having been to every tournament since hosting in 1994. But they are in danger of failing to make it 18 qualifications in a row after two poor home results in their opening two Group H qualifiers.

After the trauma of the World Cup, where they were the only African team that did not advance to the last 32, and changed their coach after one game, it was hoped Mouin Chaabani would settle the side – even though key midfielder

West African clash...Ivory Coast winger Yan Diomande takes on Ghana's Kojo Peprah Oppong

Already under pressure...Tunisia head coach Mouin Chaabani

Ellyes Skhiri retired from international duty after 86 Eagles of Carthage caps.

Tunisia were leading at home against Uganda, then gave away a second-half equaliser. Four days later against Botswana, with whom they switched home and away games, they could only draw 2-2 in front of a sparse crowd that reflected support dissatisfaction.

4 TOUGH TRANSITION AFTER THE WORLD CUP

Algeria, Ivory Coast and Senegal all changed coaches despite reaching the World Cup knockout rounds, and the transition has proved far from smooth.

Patrick Vieira's appointment as head coach of Senegal had to go through several political humps before being confirmed, and he started without Sadio Mane (injured) and goalkeeper Edouard Mendy, who has retired from international football. Senegal began their Group J campaign with a 1-1 draw in Maputo against Mozambique, followed by a squeaky 1-0 success in Ethiopia, where they had to hang on after an early goal by Aston Villa new boy Ibrahim Mbaye.

Algeria named Brahim Hemdani as new coach only weeks before their first Group I qualifiers, and among his first actions was to send left-back Rayan Ait Nouri back to Manchester City after benching him for their first qualifier. They did, however, collect four points after beating Zambia at home before surviving an away scare at Burundi, where they came back from 2-0 down.

Ivory Coast re-hired Herve Renard, who took them to the continental crown in 2015, and beat Ghana 2-0 at home to start. Their second game in Group C was also at home with Somalia ceding home advantage but, even with fulsome support in Abidjan, it took until the 89th minute to get a goal before adding a second in stoppage time for a far from comfortable 2-0 triumph.

5 TRIO OF CO-HOSTS TRYING TO FIND SOME FORM

Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda will co-host the finals in June but are all participating in the preliminaries, hoping to build capacity and momentum.

Uganda have embarked on a project to find players with some connection to the country they can use. Ghana-born forward Kelvin Boateng, who plays in Europe for Austria Vienna, is an example with a grandmother from the East African country.

Kenya coach Benni McCarthy is also searching but struggling to find talent as the 1-1 home draw with Eritrea and the 1-0 loss in Guinea in Group D showed.

Tanzania also struggled in their opening two Group L games, losing 2-0 at home to Guinea-Bissau and then drawing 1-1 with Madagascar.

Back in Abidjan...Ivory Coast head coach Herve Renard watches his team's victory over Ghana

Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

5 Things...

...from Asian football

Inaugural FIFA ASEAN Cup winners... Indonesia lift the trophy

1 INDONESIA WIN INAUGURAL FIFA ASEAN CUP

Indonesia have never won the existing Southeast Asian tournament that has been running since 1996 despite making six final appearances. They did, however, win the inaugural FIFA ASEAN Cup in October – a competition suddenly announced by Gianni Infantino a year ago.

In front of 70,000 fans in Jakarta, the Garuda beat Thailand in a penalty shootout to claim regional supremacy and allow John Herdman to claim English supremacy over compatriot coach Anthony Hudson.

The host nation provided the supporters and the passion as most other games were played in front of low crowds and not much interest, at least in the early stages.

The final group games were full of drama. With Malaysia beating Singapore 6-0, Indonesia needed two goals in stoppage time against Bangladesh and did get them to win 9-2 – cue the kind of controversy, conspiracy theories and complaints that every tournament needs.

2 SAUDI ARABIA WIN IN THE GULF, OMAN AND IRAQ PROVIDE THE DRAMA

Hosts Saudi Arabia deservedly won the eight-nation Arabian Gulf Cup for the first time since 2004, defeating the United Arab Emirates 2-0 in the final, but nothing could match the unforgettable drama of the final group game.

Iraq were in the driving seat and only needed a draw against the already-qualified Saudis to take second spot, but head coach Graham Arnold rested players already on a yellow card and ended up losing 2-0. Oman were beating Kuwait 2-1 and needed to score one more to draw level with Iraq on points, goals and goal difference. In that eventuality, the teams would be separated on fair-play rules, with Oman on seven bookings to Iraq's eight.

With a few minutes to go, Musab Al Shaqsy got the all-important goal for Oman – but incredibly, took off his shirt in celebration and was booked. That meant the drawing of lots at a Jeddah hotel and Oman, fortunately for Al Shaqsy, made it through.

Pakistan boss... Nolberto Solano at the recent ASEAN Cup

3 BANGLADESH AND PAKISTAN LOOKING FOR SOUTH ASIAN SUCCESS

Next, it is South Asia's turn to stage

2026 Asian Games winners...South Korea players celebrate

its regional championship, but there is a problem for the organisers. Back in 2015, Afghanistan left the region to join Central Asia's CAFA, and Nepal are currently suspended, which only leaves six teams. In the past, the likes of Lebanon and Kuwait have been invited as guests, but this time there are just two groups of three.

Bangladesh are hosts and, under American coach Tom Dooley, will have their eyes on a first title since 2003 and should have few issues finishing above one of Bhutan or Sri Lanka.

Nine-time champions India are the biggest threat. Much attention will be on Pakistan, who now seem to be back on the international circuit after participating in the FIFA ASEAN Cup as guests. In a much tougher group featuring India and Maldives, if Noberto Solano can take the Greenshirts to the semis, the bosses back in Lahore will be delighted.

4 SOUTH KOREA TAKE GOLD AT ASIAN GAMES BUT...

South Korea defeated arch-rivals and host nation Japan in the Asian Games in October to take gold for the fourth successive tournament and win the players exemption from the 18 months' military service that all able bodied males must start by the time they are 28.

It's a huge prize and meaningful for those wanting to make the most of their short careers. But given that millions of compatriots at home don't have the same opportunity and have to enlist, a certain sensitivity from the players is expected. In other words, celebrate gold as much as you want but don't mention the other prize.

The team's captain Lee Gi-hyuk was among those to miss that memo, proudly declaring: "I'm not going to the military!" after the 1-0 final win, and was quickly forced into an apology. "I am deeply sorry to the fans who are currently fulfilling their military duty, as well as to all those who sincerely supported us," he said. Authorities, though, have said that the whole issue of exemption it grants athletes will now be reviewed following the controversy.

5 CHINA'S STRUGGLES

There was plenty of friendly action during the September and October window too. China made unwanted headlines by losing 5-0 at home to Palestine, five days after a 3-0 loss to New Zealand. It was their fourth heaviest defeat and the worst given the opposition, although Palestine did have a great deal more international experience, with a number of the Chinese over in Japan to compete in the Asian Games.

More expected was Brazil's 4-0 win over India in Kolkata. The visitors – who drew 1-1 with Australia before beating the Socceroos 4-2 – brought a strong team, showed their skills but went a little easy on the hosts, who were also happy with a 1-1 draw with Panama. A 6-1 thrashing at the hands of Uruguay was less welcome in a game interrupted by a thunderstorm in Kolkata.

Uruguay arrived in India after a 4-1 win over South Korea, who had a mixed start to Robert Moreno's interim tenure. There were wins over Ecuador (3-0) and Uzbekistan (2-0) and a goalless draw with Venezuela.

Difficult times... China lost 3-0 to New Zealand

CONCACAF

JAMES NALTON

5 Things...

...from the CONCACAF Nations League

1 WONDERKID CAVAN SULLIVAN STARS FOR THE STARS AND STRIPES

As one of the four top-ranked teams in the region, the United States have a bye to the Nations League quarter-finals, so like Mexico, Canada and Panama, they spent this window playing friendlies. It was still a useful run of games for coach Mauricio Pochettino as displays from a number of young debutants hinted at a very strong future for the USMNT.

Cavan Sullivan was the standout, perhaps unsurprisingly given his recent good form for a resurgent Philadelphia Union in MLS and his impending move to Manchester City. He made his debut in a 4-1 victory against Peru aged 16, before scoring his first goal for his country in an impressive 3-0 win against Mexico, having just turned 17.

Inevitably, comparisons have been drawn with Freddy Adu, who debuted for the US national team at 16 and remains the US's youngest-ever player but ultimately failed to live up to the huge expectations placed on him as a teenager. The former striker remains a byword for missed potential, and Sullivan needs more protection than Adu received 20 years ago.

US wonderkid... Cavan Sullivan

Slow start... Mexico boss Rafael Marquez

2 JAMAICA EYE MARQUEZ'S STRUGGLING MEXICO

Despite missing several of their more familiar names, Jamaica still managed to scrape through – pipping Suriname on goal difference in League A Group B – to make the Nations League last eight

US wonderkid ...Cavan Sullivan

Mexico's quarter-final opponents...Jamaica's Javon East and Kaheim Dixon celebrate a goal against El Salvador

where they will fancy their chances.

The tempo was set for the Reggae Boyz under interim coach Rudolph Speid when Renaldo Cephas scored in added time to snatch all three points against Guatemala in a dramatic 3-2 win. A 2-0 victory against El Salvador and a goal from Charlton Athletic's Tyreece Campbell to earn a 1-1 draw away to Honduras was enough to see them qualify from a tight group.

They face Mexico over two legs in November's quarter-finals, and might see an opprtunity to cause an upset. New *El Tri* boss Rafael Marquez, who had long been lined up to take over from Javier Aguirre, has experienced a difficult start, going winless in his first four games in charge and ending with defeats to both the US and Chile.

3 THE RISE OF THE CARIBBEAN

A trend may be beginning to develop in the southern regions of CONCACAF, as usual Central American heavyweights are struggling and being replaced in the latter stages of tournaments by surging Caribbean nations.

Having qualified for the 2026 World Cup from a group containing Honduras, Costa Rica and Nicaragua, Haiti followed up with qualification for the Nations League quarter-finals for the first time.

They did so at the expense of Costa Rica, who lost to Curacao (inexplicably surrending a 3-0 lead at home to lose 4-3) as well as Haiti (2-0), and at that stage were worried about relegation to League B more than qualification. They recovered under caretaker coach and national team legend Bryan Ruiz with a 3-0 win against Nicaragua and another in their second meeting with Haiti, but it's the Haitians who progress along with unbeaten Curacao, whose convincing 6-1 win against Nicaragua was further evidence of the rise of the Caribbean.

Curacao face Central America's strongest team, Panama, in the last eight and, the way things are going, another Caribbean upset could be on the cards. Haiti, meanwhile, will face Pochettino's United States, while Guatemala will take on Canada.

4 BARBADOS GIVE THEMSELVES A CHANCE TO MAKE HISTORY

Another notable Caribbean performance was that of Barbados in League B. They went into this campaign having just been promoted from League C, and ended up finishing this international window unbeaten in clashes against Saint Lucia, Guadeloupe and Bermuda (twice).

Despite being the lowest-ranked side in their group, they picked up three wins and a draw, with the goals of Thierry Gale and Niall Reid-Stephen ensuring that, with two games to go, they are already safe from relegation back to League C. Bolton Wanderers forward Gale scored six goals in this run of four games, taking his overall tally for his country to 14 in 19 appearances.

League B group games continue in November, and Barbados have put themselves in a position to secure promotion to League A and qualify for the CONCACAF Gold Cup for the first time in their history.

5 US VIRGIN ISLANDS IMPROVE BUT NARROWLY MISS OUT ON PROMOTION

A 2-0 win against group favourites Saint Martin in the opening match of their Nations League C campaign gave the US Virgin Islands a rare glimpse of hope, and following it up with a 3-1 win against the Bahamas gave them even more. For the team ranked 206th in the FIFA world rakings, this was the first time in their history they had secured back-to-back wins.

The fact they were the hosts for these Group C games gave them further cause to be optimistic and look to build on their promising start, until a 5-0 defeat in the second meeting with Saint Martin brought them crashing back down to earth.

That result proved crucial in terms of goal difference, securing promotion to League B for Saint Martin and ensuring that the US Virgin Islands missed out on promotion via the ranking of second-place teams (finishing behind Aruba). Nevertheless, it was a notable campaign which ended on a high with another win against the Bahamas, this time 3-2.

First-time Nations League quarter-finalists...Haiti forwards Wilson Isidor and Louicius Deedson

Australia

MIKE TUCKERMAN

Preview

Austerity bites in new A-League season

The new campaign kicked off with few big names and little fanfare amid the latest round of cost-cutting

Fresh off the Socceroos reaching the 2026 World Cup knockout stages, hopes should have been high for the new A-League campaign. Yet the competition continues to struggle for cash, with a new hard salary cap of just AU$3 million per club the latest austerity measure.

It was the clubs themselves who pushed to "unbundle" the competition from Football Australia in December 2020, but the move has produced few obvious benefits. Clubs are now permitted just one marquee player outside the salary cap, yet the last player to fit the bill was 38-year-old Juan Mata. The Spaniard produced a sparkling campaign for Melbourne Victory last term, but has opted not to return.

Victory responded by signing forward Guillermo May, who was out of contract after departing reigning champions Auckland FC. The New Zealanders are beginning a new era under Portuguese coach Pedro Moreira, following the departure of their title-winning boss Steve Corica to Yokohama F. Marinos in the J. League. Lachie Bayliss has arrived in Auckland from the Newcastle Jets, but the loss of a host of key players means Moreira will have his work cut out repeating last season's success.

Beaten grand finalists Sydney FC also said goodbye to some key men, with Paul Okon-Engstler leaving for Cologne and former Nottingham Forest winger Joe Lolley joining Newcastle Jets. However the Sky Blues look stronger than last season, with veteran Japanese winger Takahiro Sekine, teenage former Manchester United right-back James

Holders...Auckland FC have a new-look team this season

Overy, Nigerian striker Oriola Sunday and on-loan Portsmouth defender Jacob Farrell all bolstering the squad.

It's all change at Melbourne Victory, with Venezuelan coach and former pundit Giovanni Savarese swapping a Major League Soccer broadcast booth for a spot in the dugout at the A-League's best-supported club. Welsh defender Tom Lockyer and German right-back Philipp Ziereis add European experience to the back four.

Melbourne City are one of the few clubs who can afford to flex their finances, and the City Football Group-backed outfit have brought in Socceroos winger Awer Mabil from Spanish side Castellon and Brazilian midfielder Matheus Rossetto from Fortaleza. But it's the signing of attacking midfielder Emiliano Marcondes from Norwich City who could prove key, with the former Danish youth international looking to offset the loss of Andreas Kuen. Coach Aurelio Vidmar will also have to make do without the league's best goalkeeper Patrick Beach, who has joined fellow CFG side Troyes in Ligue 1.

Central Coast Mariners are also now linked to an English club after they were bought by Total Soccer Growth Holdings, who hold a majority stake in Queens Park Rangers. Their new coach, John Hutchinson, won a championship during a ten-year playing spell with the Gosford outfit, but he'll be asking for a much-needed injection of funds from his new bosses if he is to repeat that success.

Newcastle Jets were last season's entertainers, but they've suffered the usual fate of A-League over-achievers and had their table-topping squad stripped bare. Coach Mark Milligan will have to start all over again with a new-look side, but the Jets have made some astute signings in former Sydney FC trio Lolley, Alex Grant and Patrick Wood, while ex-Melbourne Victory striker Nikos Vergos will look to resurrect his career after failing to impress in Victoria.

Juan Mata produced a sparkling campaign for Melbourne Victory last term, but has opted not to return

Macarthur have a new coach in Sasa Ognenovski and have also overhauled their squad, with out-of-contract Scottish winger Ryan Fraser a surprise signing after spending last season at Western Sydney Wanderers. New arrivals Apostolos Stamatelopoulos and Musa Toure should give the Bulls plenty of firepower up front.

Chris Greenacre has been confirmed as Wellington Phoenix's head coach after his fourth stint in the interim hotseat last season. An eighth-place finish saw plenty of talent head for the exit door, but the signings of left-back James McGarry, Scottish box-to-box midfielder Max Anderson and American creative talent Bryce Duke should bring renewed optimism to the Kiwi capital.

Perth Glory have kept the faith in Adam Griffiths but lost veteran striker Adam Taggart to Hanoi FC and defender Scott Wootton to retirement, while Brisbane Roar coach Michael Valkanis is under serious pressure to turn around the fortunes of the Queensland club. The Roar have signed some big names, including former South Korea international Nam Tae-hee and former Wigan Athletic midfielder Tyrese Francois.

The most intriguing storyline will play out in Parramatta, with Ufuk Talay the latest to cross Sydney's derby divide and take over at Western Sydney Wanderers. The former Sydney FC tactician can call upon some quality signings, with Miguel Di Pizio, Liam Gillion, Panashe Madanha, Nicolas Milanovic and German Ferreyra all experienced campaigners.

Yet the austerity era has few fans excited about the quality of the competition. "Be very careful what you wish for," warned former Football Australia chairman Stephen Lowy – and his parting shot is still reverberating around an A-League that is decidedly short on star power.

Walking away... Juan Mata was the A-League's Player of the Year in 2025-26

Back in Australia...winger Awer Mabil returned to the A-league 11 years after leaving Adelaide United

Vanuatu

STEVE MENARY

Vanuatu United...the team lines up ahead of a game against South Island United
Credit: OFC Media via Phototek

OFC Pro League paying dividends for Vanuatu

Vanuatu's football scene has been transformed by Oceania's first professional competition

One of the aims of the Oceania Football Confederation's new Pro League was to raise standards. That was expected to take time, but in Vanuatu the improvement has been meteoric.

Vanuatu has a population of 340,000 and unlike many across the Pacific, football rather than rugby is the most popular sport. But there was nowhere for players on the Melanesian island to play full-time until the advent of the Pro League in January of this year.

German coach Lars Hopp was brought in to take charge of both the newly created Vanuatu United club side and the national team. Unlike most of the other teams in the Pro League, Vanuatu United did not host any matches and initial progress was slow.

Hopp's side did not register a win until their fifth game and finished second-bottom after the initial circuit series. But then they hit form, storming through the play-off round, topping a group featuring Solomon Kings, Tahiti United and Hekari from Papua New Guinea without losing a match.

> "I believe the Pacific region has some really good players and now they have the platform to showcase their capabilities"
> Vanuatu United caretaker manager Matt Acton

After beating Fiji's Bula in a play-off, Australia's South Melbourne proved too strong in the semi-final.

OFC Pro League... William Cardona celebrates a goal during last season
Credit: OFC Media via Phototek

In September, Vanuatu United returned home and sensationally beat Australia A-League giants Central Coast Mariners 3-2 in Port Vila. Goals from Joe Moses, Bill Kaltack and Claude Aru secured victory in the first professional game staged on the island.

A week later, a goal from Moses secured a 1-0 win in the second of the two-match PacificAus Sports Challenge and a clean sweep for Matt Acton, the side's Australian goalkeeper who had taken charge temporarily in Hopp's absence.

"I believe the players will take great confidence out of the results," says the experienced Acton. "They now know their capabilities and what is possible. I feel like the result was more a reflection of how far the club, players and sport have come in a short amount of time.

"So, although a positive result, the most pleasing thing for me as the coach was that the players were able to help inspire the fans and next generation of footballers in Vanuatu."

Acton played for Brisbane Roar and professionally in Myanmar and the Philippines before joining Vanuatu for the club's debut in the Pro League. "To be part of a new project was very appealing and something different which I hadn't experienced before," says Acton.

A former Australia Under-20 international, Acton has another year on his contract in Vanuatu and is positive about the new club's chances in the Pro League's forthcoming second season.

He says: "I felt that the standard naturally grew as the season went on. We need to remember that not only is it a new league, but for 90-95% of the players it is also their first time as full-time professional footballers. Naturally there will be an adjustment and improvements with that.

"I believe the Pacific region has some really good players and now they have the platform to showcase their capabilities. I am impressed with the current level of the Pro League and really interested to see how much improvement there is next year."

The second season of the Pro League kicks off in February 2027 and those clubs who did not host a series in the 2026 circuit are expected to get an opportunity this time around. With a 100% record from the only professional club matches played so far in Vanuatu, Hopp, Acton and the players have every reason to be confident.

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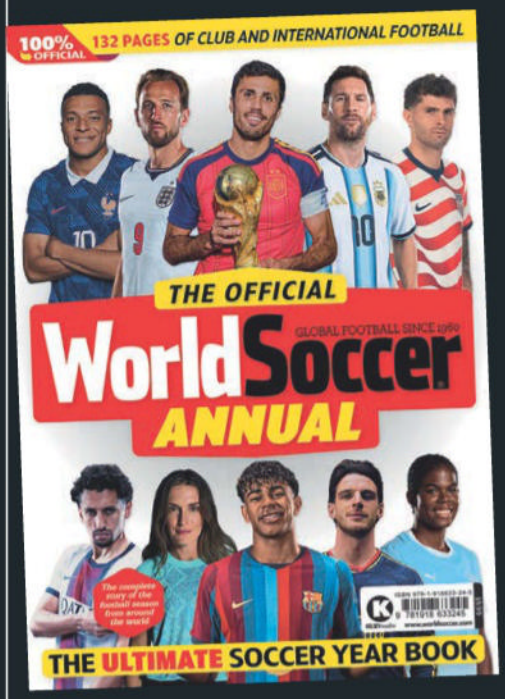
Three fantastic annuals from World Soccer and MATCH!



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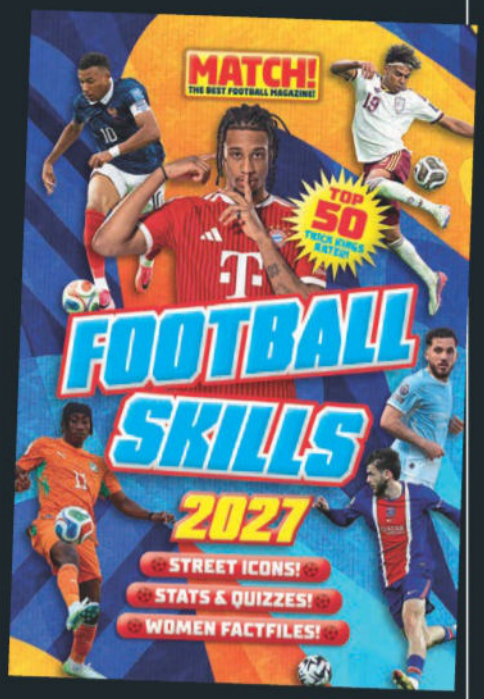

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Tales from the 211

Exploring the weird and wonderful world of football across FIFA's 211 member nations – and beyond

Dumped out... Cienciano's Gonzalo Aguirre reacts to his side's elimination from the Copa Sudamericana

CIENCIANO COACH'S BADLY TIMED TOILET BREAK

Peruvian club Cienciano had a two-goal lead over Montevideo City Torque following the first leg of their Copa Sudamericana quarter-final tie, only for the Uruguayans to cancel out that advantage in normal time of the return fixture. With the game seemingly heading for penalties – South America's secondary club competition does not have extra-time in the event of aggregate draws – Cienciano boss Horacio Melgarejo answered a call of nature in stoppage time.

But Montevideo City Torque, who are part of the City Football Group, scored in the 92nd minute through Nahuel Da Silva to complete the comeback. By the time Melgarejo returned to brief his players for the shootout, they had already been eliminated.

Cienciano had been aiming to win their third South American trophy after the Copa Sudamericana in 2003 and the Recopa Sudamericana in 2004 – a remarkable haul considering the club have never been champions of Peru. That puts them on a very short list of clubs to have won multiple continental trophies but never their own domestic league – along with the likes of Parma (Italy) and Pyramids FC (Egypt).

SK BISCHOFSHOFEN ON A SLIPPERY SLOPE

SK Bischofshofen, who are based near Salzburg, have been competing in the Austrian Cup this season despite not having a league to play in. This highly unusual situation can be traced back to a dispute with the municipal authorities, who voted to give their ground to the local ski club when the lease expired – reportedly due to concerns about the football club's management and a lack of youth development.

The ski club has since founded its own football team, which goes by the remarkably similar name of SC Bischofshofen, while SK Bischofshofen have been rendered homeless and were forced to drop out of Austria's third tier as a result. They were still allowed to take part in the Austrian Cup – provided they played all their games away from home.

Despite the circumstances, they still managed to beat Union Dietach on penalties in the first round following a 3-3 draw, setting up a tie against top-flight Altach. Unsurprisingly, they suffered a heavy 7-0 defeat.

But it was not the scoreline that made the headlines – it was Bischofshofen's squad, which had been hastily assembled and included a 62-year-old pensioner, a 57-year-old entrepreneur and a 15-year-old goalkeeper.

The pensioner, Walter Weiss, had not been active since the mid-1990s according to website *Transfermarkt*, when he played for SC Tisis – a team formerly sponsored by the local Spar supermarket. He and Stephan Prahauser came on in the 80th minute in a double substitution with a combined age of 119 years, as SK Bischofshofen played out what is sadly likely to be the final game of their 91-year existence.

NON-LEAGUE KEEPER'S ROYAL NOMINATION

George Desmond Kamurasi, a Ugandan-born goalkeeper for SE Dons in the English ninth tier, went viral after becoming king of a tribe in his home country.

The 36-year-old inherited the throne of the Tooro people after the death of his cousin, King Oyo. According to media reports in Uganda, he was put forward for the position by Tooro's royal succession committee, with 15 of the 18 members present voting for Kamurasi.

The early indications were that Kamurasi was reluctant to take up the role – a sentiment perhaps best illustrated by his decision to play in an FA Vase qualifier against Greenways rather than attend his cousin's funeral. In the end, the non-league shot-stopper did turn down the throne in order to focus on his family and football career in the United Kingdom.

If he had accepted the offer, he would not have been the first currently active royal footballer: Faiq Bolkiah, a 28-year-old winger for Thai club Ratchaburi, is the nephew of the Sultan of Brunei and is often described as the world's richest footballer due to his family's vast wealth.

The Sweeper

COMING UP...

Jeddeloh II v Hertha Berlin
German Cup, October 28
Jeddeloh II, the only team from outside German football's top three tiers left in this season's DFB-Pokal, will face Hertha Berlin in the second round. Often mistaken for a reserve side, they take their name from a village in Lower Saxony.

Viking v Sabah
UEFA Champions League, November 4
Four clubs have made their UCL debuts in this season's competition, but only two of them will meet in the league phase: Viking of Norway and Sabah from Azerbaijan.

Finland v San Marino
UEFA Nations League, November 15
Simply reaching League C of the Nations League was a huge achievement for San Marino, who are the world's worst national team according to the FIFA rankings.

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Internationals

2026-27 UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE

League A

Group A1

Sep 25 – Rome
Italy 0
Belgium 2 (Godts 20, Lukebakio 69)
Italy: Donnarumma – Di Lorenzo, Mancini, Coppola (Scalvini 65), Calafiori; Barella (Doumbia 80), Romano (Frattesi 65), Tonali; Kean, P. Esposito (Maldini 65), Cambiaghi (Zoma 80).
Belgium: Lammens – Castagne, Ngoy, Mechele, De Cuyper; Raskin (Lavia 74), Tielemans; Moreira (Lukebakio 58), De Bruyne (Vanaken 58), Godts (Fernandez-Pardo 83); De Ketelaere (Lukaku 83).

Sep 25 – Izmit
Turkey 0
France 1 (Mbappe 54)
Turkey: Cakir – Celik, Demiral, Bardakci; Aydin (Elmali 76), Yuksek (Kabasakal 88), Ozcan, Kadioglu (Gul 90+3); Guler, Uzun (Akturkoglu 75); Yilmaz (Bayindir 88).
Sent off: Cakir 87.
France: Maignan – Kounde, Upamecano, Lacroix, Truffert; Cherki (Camavinga 78), Kone, Rabiot; Olise (Barcola 78), Dembele (Lepaul 90), Mbappe (Doue 59).

Sep 28 – Brussels
Belgium 0
France 1 (Olise 88)
Belgium: Lammens – Castagne, Ngoy, Mechele, Seys (De Cuyper 68); Lavia (Raskin 85), Tielemans; Moreira (Lukebakio 63), De Bruyne (Vanaken 63), Godts; De Ketelaere (Fernandez-Pardo 85).
France: Maignan – Kalulu, Jacquet, Lacroix, Diouf; Akliouche (Cherki 77), Da Cunha (Kone 90), Camavinga; Doue, Lepaul (Dembele 68), Barcola (Olise 77).

Sep 28 – Bursa
Turkey 1 (Yilmaz 47)
Italy 4 (Bastoni 9, Frattesi 22, Kayode 27, P. Esposito 50)
Turkey: Bayindir – Celik, Demiral (Bardakci 46), Kabak; Aydin, Kokcu (Yuksek 46), Ozcan (Tiknaz 76), Elmali; Guler, Yilmaz (Gul 80), Uzun (Akturkoglu 46).
Italy: Donnarumma – Kayode, Scalvini, Bastoni, Ruggeri; Frattesi (Di Lorenzo 82), Tonali, Fagioli (Romano 76); Raspadori (Cambiaghi 46), P. Esposito (Scamacca 75), S. Esposito (Doumbia 63).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
France	2	2	0	0	2	0	6
Belgium	2	1	0	1	2	1	3
Italy	2	1	0	1	4	3	3
Turkey	2	0	0	2	1	5	0

Group A2

Sep 24 – Amsterdam
Netherlands 1 (Gakpo 90+2)
Germany 1 (Nmecha 32)
Netherlands: Verbruggen – Dumfries, Van Hecke, Van Dijk, Van de Ven; Gravenberch, Q. Timber (Veerman 57); Summerville (Van Bommel 83), Reijnders (Til 83) Gakpo; Brobbey (Meerdink 35).
Germany: Ter Stegen – Treu, Tah, Schlotterbeck, Brown; Nmecha (Stach 64), Kimmich; Adeyemi (Gnabry 80), Amiri (Engelhardt 80), Schade (Fuhrich 64); Havertz (Ebnoutalib 30).

Sep 24 – Belgrade
Serbia 1 (Zivkovic 4)
Greece 2 (Tzolis 74, Douvikas 90+4)
Serbia: V. Milinkovic-Savic – Simic (Gudelj 81), Erakovic, Pavlovic, Kostic (Terzic 71); Zivkovic, Maksimovic, S. Milinkovic-Savic, Cvetkovic (Lukic 46); Jovic (Joveljic 71), Tadic (Sukacev 90).
Greece: Tzolakis – Vagiannidis, Mavropanos (Michailidis 90+1), Retsos, Tsimikas; Karetsas (Douvikas 74), Kourbelis, Zafeiris (Androutsos 90+1), Tzolis; Kostoulas (Ioannidis 63), Pavlidis (Tetteh 74).

Sep 27 – Belgrade
Serbia 1 (Jovic 46)
Netherlands 2 (Meerdink 30 pen, 69)
Serbia: V. Milinkovic-Savic – Nedeljkovic (Erakovic 59), Gudelj, Babic, Pavlovic (Kostic 71), Terzic; Zivkovic, Stankovic (Maksimovic 59), Lukic, S. Milinkovic-Savic (Tadic 46); Joveljic (Jovic 46).
Netherlands: Verbruggen – Dumfries (J. Timber 80), Van Hecke, Van Dijk, Van de Ven; Gravenberch (Til 67), Veerman, Reijnders (Taylor 67); Summerville, Meerdink (Q. Timber 80), Gakpo (Van Bommel 17).

Sep 27 – Augsburg
Germany 0
Greece 1 (Kourbelis 74)
Germany: Nubel – Vagnoman, Bisseck, Tah, Brown (Behrens 84); Nmecha (Stach 84), Kimmich; Adeyemi (Gnabry 75), Conte (Wirtz 65), Schade (Burkardt 65); Ebnoutalib.
Greece: Tzolakis – Vagiannidis (Saliakas 46), Mavropanos, Retsos, Tsimikas; Karetsas, Zafeiris (Kourbelis 59), Androutsos, Tzolis (Masouras 81); Pavlidis (Michailidis 89), Tetteh (Ioannidis 59).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Greece	2	2	0	0	3	1	6
Netherlands	2	1	1	0	3	2	4
Germany	2	0	1	1	1	2	1
Serbia	2	0	0	2	2	4	0

Group A3

Sep 26 – Prague
Czech Republic 1 (Karabec 54)
Croatia 2 (Modric 47, Marco Pasalic 77)
Czech Republic: Hornicek – Coufal, Hranac, Chaloupek, Slama (Zmrzly 83); Sadilek, Cerv (Kral 67); Ambros (Radosta 67), Sulc (Sejk 83), Karabec (Subert 74); Hlozek.
Croatia: Livakovic – Stanisic, Vuskovic, Gvardiol, Perisic; Modric (Misic 76), Kovacic; L. Sucic (Mario Pasalic 63), P. Sucic (Vlasic 88), Ivanovic (Marco Pasalic 63); Matanovic (Budimir 63).

Sep 26 – Wembley
England 2 (Gordon 36, Kane 40)
Spain 3 (Yamal 2, Baena 60, Oyarzabal 74)
England: Trafford – Quansah, Konsa, Guehi (Branthwaite 89), O'Reilly; Anderson, Lewis-Skelly (Garner 70); Saka (Gibbs-White 83), Bellingham, Gordon (Rogers 70); Kane (Calvert-Lewin 83).
Spain: Simon – Pubill, Cubarsi, Laporte, Cucurella; Rodri, Fabian (Pedri 70); Yamal, Olmo (Merino 82), Williams (Baena 55); Ferran (Oyarzabal 55).

Sep 29 – Prague
Czech Republic 0
England 2 (Gordon 47, Kane 69)
Czech Republic: Kovar – Chaloupek, Hranac, Krejci, Slama; Sadilek (Kral 56), Cerv (Macek 80); Radosta (Ambros 57), Sulc, Karabec (Lingr 45); Hlozek (Vasulin 80).
Sent off: Sulc 25.
England: Trafford – Alexander-Arnold, Chalobah, Guehi, Hall; Anderson (Scott 70), Lewis-Skelly (Eze 46); Saka (Ngumoha 71), Rogers, Gordon (Gibbs-White 81); Kane (Bellingham 71).

Sep 29 – Seville
Spain 4 (Yamal 2, 63, Pubill 31, Williams 89)
Croatia 1 (Beljo 28)
Spain: Simon – Pubill, Cubarsi, Huijsen, Cucurella; Fermin (Merino 57), Zubimendi (Rodri 72), Fabian (Pedri 57); Yamal (Munoz 68), Oyarzabal, Baena (Williams 68).
Croatia: Livakovic – Smoljic, Sutalo, Pongracic (Vuskovic 46), Gvardiol; Misic, Kovacic (Mario Pasalic 60); Marco Pasalic, P. Sucic (Modric 81), Perisic (Ivanovic 72); Beljo (Budimir 60).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Spain	2	2	0	0	7	3	6
England	2	1	0	1	4	3	3
Croatia	2	1	0	1	3	5	3
Czech Republic	2	0	0	2	1	4	0

Group A4

Sep 24 – Oslo
Norway 3 (Bobb 14, Haaland 18, 74)
Denmark 2 (Damsgaard 25, Hojlund 60)
Norway: Nyland – Ryerson, Ajer, Heggem, Aursnes (Moller-Wolfe 66); Odegaard, Berge, Berg (Schjelderup 66); Bobb (Aasgaard 66), Haaland, Nusa (Thorstvedt 89).
Sent off: Moller-Wolfe 90+3.
Denmark: F. Jorgensen – Kristensen, Andersen, Provstgaard, Maehle; Hjulmand (T. Jorgensen 88), Hojbjerg; Dorgu (Isaksen 75), Froholdt (Bidstrup 75), Damsgaard (Gronbaek 82); Hojlund (Hogh 82).

Sep 24 – Lisbon
Portugal 1 (Felix 22)
Wales 0
Portugal: D. Costa – Cancelo (Dalot 90), Dias, Veiga, Mendes (Tavares 78); R. Neves (Palhinha 67); Neto, Vitinha, Fernandes (J. Neves 90); Felix, Ronaldo (Ramos 67).
Wales: Ward – Williams, Cabango (Mepham 71), Davies, Dasilva; Brooks (D. James 63), Ampadu, Sheehan, Johnson; Koumas (Moore 77), J. James (Thomas 77).

Sep 27 – Copenhagen
Denmark 2 (Davies 53 og, Isaksen 66)
Wales 0
Denmark: F. Jorgensen – Kristensen, Andersen, Provstgaard, Maehle; Hjulmand, Hojbjerg; Isaksen (Daghim 76), Damsgaard (Froholdt 87), Dorgu (Daramy 30); Hojlund (Hogh 87).
Wales: Ward – Roberts, Mepham, Davies, Williams; Ampadu, Savage (Sheehan 60); D. James (J. James 67), Johnson (Burns 83), Thomas; Moore (Koumas 67).

Sep 27 – Oslo
Norway 1 (Haaland 51)
Portugal 2 (Felix 17, Ramos 54)
Norway: Nyland – Aursnes, Ajer, Heggem, Ryerson (Ostigard 66); Odegaard, Berge, Berg (Bobb 72); Schjelderup, Haaland, Nusa (Strand Larsen 81).
Portugal: D. Costa – Cancelo, Dias, Veiga, Mendes; Palhinha (R. Neves 80); Conceicao (Leao 56), J. Neves (Vitinha 55), Neto (B. Silva 87); Felix, Ramos (Trincao 81).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Portugal	2	2	0	0	3	1	6
Norway	2	1	0	1	4	4	3
Denmark	2	1	0	1	4	3	3
Wales	2	0	0	2	0	3	0

League B

Group B1

Sep 26 – Ljubljana
Slovenia 0
Scotland 0
Slovenia: Oblak – Karnicnik, Brekalo (Balkovec 74), Bijol, Drkusic (Zec 64), Janza; Matko, Gnezda Cerin (Lovric 80), Elsnik (Zabukovnik 64), Sturm; Sporar (Vipotnik 74).
Scotland: Gunn – Hendry, McKenna, Welsh; Hickey (Gannon-Doak 78), Gilmour, Ferguson, Robertson; McGinn; Ure (Bowie 67), McBurnie.

Sep 26 – Skopje
North Macedonia 0
Switzerland 3 (Freuler 22, Amdouni 41, 74)
North Macedonia: Dimitrievski – Ilievski (Stojchevski 75), Zajkov (Meliqi 56), Musliu, Herrera; Kostadinov (Mitrovski 46), Gashtarov, Bardhi, Elmas; Miovski (Omeragikj 56), Rastoder (Elezi 46).
Switzerland: Kobel – Athekame, Elvedi, Akanji, Rodriguez (Britschgi 63); Jashari, Freuler; Rieder (Sanches 75), Manzambi (Sow 63), Ndoye (Aebischer 75); Amdouni (Boteli 86).

Sep 29 – Glasgow
Scotland 0
Switzerland 3 (Rodriguez 12, Elvedi 55, Amdouni 82)
Scotland: Gunn – Hendry, McKenna, Binks; Patterson (Gannon-Doak 59), Ferguson, Gilmour (Christie 59), Robertson (Doig 74); McGinn; Bowie (Welsh 13), McBurnie (Ure 59).
Sent off: Hendry 11.
Switzerland: Kobel – Athekame, Elvedi, Akanji, Rodriguez (Britschgi 62); Freuler, Jashari (Sierro 70); Aebischer, Manzambi (Rieder 63), Ndoye (Itten 86); Amdouni (Sanches 86).

Sep 29 – Ljubljana
Slovenia 2 (Lovric 55, Matko 82)
North Macedonia 0
Slovenia: Oblak – Karnicnik, Brekalo, Bijol, Drkusic (Zec 85), Janza; Begic (Matko 71), Lovric (Zabukovnik 71), Gnezda Cerin (Elsnik 85), Sturm; Vipotnik (Celar 71).
North Macedonia: Dimitrievski – Stojchevski, Mladenovski, Meliqi (Musliu 71), Alomerovic (Miovski 80); Gashtarov, Atanasov (Stankovski 71); Mitrovski (Maleski 61), Elezi (Bardhi 61), Elmas; Omeragikj.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Switzerland	2	2	0	0	6	0	6
Slovenia	2	1	1	0	2	0	4
Scotland	2	0	1	1	0	3	1
N. Macedonia	2	0	0	2	0	5	0

Group B2

Sep 25 – Tbilisi
Georgia 0
Northern Ireland 1 (S. Charles 90+9)
Georgia: Mamardashvili – Goglichidze (Beriashvili 85), Dvali, Lochoshvili (Tabidze 85); Kakabadze, Kochorashvili, Mekvabishvili (Kiteishvili 77), Kharebashvili (Chakvetadze 46); Kvernadze (Davitashvili 77), Mikautadze; Kvaratskhelia.
Northern Ireland: P. Charles – Atcheson (O'Neill 86), Ballard (McNair 90+5), Brown (McConville 72); Hume, S. Charles, Galbraith, Devenny; Kelly (Spencer 73), Price; Donley (Magennis 73).

Sep 25 – Budapest
Hungary 0
Ukraine 1 (Sikan 42)
Hungary: B. Toth – Bolla, Orban, Csinger (Szucs 84), Kerkez; Vitalis (M. Toth 46), Csongvai (R. Toth 66), Schafer; Szoboszlai; Redzic (Jurek 62), Lukacs (Barany 46).
Ukraine: Riznyk – Krupskyi (Bondar 59), Zabarnyi, Matviyenko, Mykolenko; Tsyhankov, Ocheretko, Brazhko (Nazaryna 46), Sudakov (Drambaiev 90+1); Sikan (Krasnopir 66), Vanat (Nazarenko 59).
Sent off: Nazarenko 90+2.

Sep 28 – Tbilisi
Georgia 0
Ukraine 0
Georgia: Mamardashvili – Kakabadze, Goglichidze, Dvali, Lochoshvili, Tsitaishvili; Kochorashvili (Yegoian 90+2), Kiteishvili (Mekvabishvili 73), Chakvetadze (Davitashvili 73); Mikautadze (Kvernadze 67), Kvaratskhelia.
Ukraine: Trubin – Bondar, Sarapii, Mykhavko; Zubkov (Tsyhankov 79), Pikhalionok (Ocheretko 46), Nazaryna, Khlan (Shaparenko 65), Mykhailichenko; Ponomarenko (Yaremchuk 46), Vanat (Sikan 46).

Sep 28 – Belfast
Northern Ireland 0
Hungary 0
Northern Ireland: P. Charles – Atcheson, McConville, Brown; Hume, S. Charles, Galbraith, Devenny; Kelly (D. Charles 70), Price (Magennis 88); Donley (Spencer 70).
Hungary: B. Toth – Bolla (Osvath 34), Orban, Csinger, Kerkez; Schafer, Csongvai (Vitalis 76); Jurek (Barany 55), Szucs (A. Toth 55), Szoboszlai; Lukacs (M. Toth 77).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
N. Ireland	2	1	1	0	1	0	4
Ukraine	2	1	1	0	1	0	4
Georgia	2	0	1	1	0	1	1
Hungary	2	0	1	1	0	1	1

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Group B3

Sep 24 – Linz
Austria 3 (Schmid 43 pen, Mwene 90, Kalajdzic 90+3)
Israel 1 (Abu Farhi 55)
Austria: A. Schlager – Posch, Lienhart, Danso, Mwene; X. Schlager, Seiwald (Horvath 73); Wimmer (Lang 73), Schmid (Chukwuemeka 82), Grull (Wanner 46); Gregoritsch (Kalajdzic 36).
Israel: D. Peretz – Mizrahi (Schlomo 64), Nachimas, Stoinov, Revivo; E. Peretz (Dasa 85); Khalaili, Dor Peretz (Levi 64), Gloukh (Abada 85), Solomon (Turgeman 73); Abu Farhi.
Sent off: Abu Farhi 56.

Sep 24 – Pristina
Kosovo 1 (Muriqi 83)
Republic of Ireland 0
Kosovo: Muric – Dellova, I. Krasniqi, Hajdari; Vojvoda, Avdullahu, Hodza (Osmani 87), Gallapeni; Zhegrova (E. Krasniqi 73), Zabergja (Rashica 73); Muriqi (Asllani 88).
Republic of Ireland: Kelleher – O'Brien, Egan (Elding 88), O'Shea; Abankwah (Coventry 80), Knight, Molumby, Scales (Manning 88); Ogbene (Moylan 61), Azaz; Parrott (Idah 80).

Sep 27 – Vienna
Austria 3 (Affengruber 23, Adamu 45+2, Chukwuemeka 61)
Kosovo 1 (Zhegrova 83 pen)
Austria: Zawieschitzky – Veratschnig (Friedl 79), Affengruber, Danso, Wober (Prass 58); X. Schlager, Seiwald; Wimmer, Wanner (Markovic 68), Schmid (Chukwuemeka 58); Adamu (Kalajdzic 58).
Kosovo: Muric (Saipi 65) – Dellova, I. Krasniqi, Raci; Vojvoda, Avdullahu, Hodza (Matoshi 46), Gallapeni; E. Krasniqi (Zhegrova 46), Muriqi (Asllani 80), Zabergja (Avdyli 46).

Sep 27 – Debrecen
Israel 0
Republic of Ireland 3 (Parrott 13, Idah 16, Moylan 25)
Israel: D. Peretz – Mizrahi (Dor Peretz 46), Schlomo, Stoinov, Revivo (Feingold 83); Khalaili (Dasa 76), Kanichowsky (Azoulay 64), E. Peretz, Solomon; Turgeman (Toklomati 64), Gloukh.
Republic of Ireland: Kelleher – O'Shea, O'Brien, Kitching; Abankwah (Knight 68), Coventry, Molumby (Bagan 88), Manning; Moylan (Phillips 68), Parrott (Vata 76), Idah (Cannon 69).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Austria	2	2	0	0	6	2	6
Kosovo	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Rep of Ireland	2	1	0	1	3	1	3
Israel	2	0	0	2	1	6	0

Group B4

Sep 25 – Warsaw
Poland 0
Bosnia & Herzegovina 0
Poland: Bulka – Cash, Potulski, Bednarek, Kiwior (Frankowski 46); Skoras (Swiderski 73), Slisz (Nowak 46), Zielinski, Kaminski (Zalewski 24); Szymanski; Lewandowski (Zukowski 87).
Bosnia & Herzegovina: Zlomislic – Smajlovic (Memic 46), Katic, Muharemovic, Kolasinac; Bajraktarevic, Basic, Sunjic (Tahirovic 66), Alajbegovic (Gigovic 90+1); Demirovic (Mahmic 78), Tabakovic (Lukic 90+1).

Sep 25 – Stockholm
Sweden 2 (Isak 20, Gyokeres 43)
Romania 1 (Man 29)
Sweden: Johansson – Holm (Svensson 63), Starfelt (Ekdal 63), Lindelof, Stroud; Bernhardsson (Walemark 77), Bergvall, Ayari, Nanasi (Gudmundsson 84); Gyokeres (Nygren 76), Isak.
Romania: Radu – Coubis, Dragusin, Ghita; Ratiu, Baluta (Screciu 46), R. Marin (Stanciu 81), Bancu; Hagi (Tanase 67); Man (Dragomir 88), Munteanu (Mihaila 67).

Sep 28 – Bucharest
Romania 2 (Birligea 28, Cicaldau 62)
Bosnia & Herzegovina 4 (Gigovic 12, Muharemovic 19, Tabakovic 40, Mahmic 55)
Romania: Radu – Coubis, Burca (Strata 81), Ilie, Eissat; Stanciu (Morutan 65), Screciu (Matei 65), Dragomir; Olaru (Cicaldau 46); Birligea, Mihaila (Munteanu 46).
Bosnia & Herzegovina: Zlomislic – Memic, Katic, Muharemovic, Kolasinac (Mujakic 81); Basic, Gigovic (Tahirovic 81); Bajraktarevic (Hasic 63), Mahmic (Demirovic 63), Alajbegovic; Tabakovic (Lukic 74).

Sep 28 – Stockholm
Sweden 3 (Nygren 8, Ayari 63, Gyokeres 72)
Poland 1 (Szymanski 43)
Sweden: Johansson – Svensson, Starfelt, Lindelof, Gudmundsson; Walemark (Bernhardsson 80), Bergvall, Ayari (Swedberg 89), Zeneli (Nanasi 63); Nygren (Larsson 80), Gyokeres (Karlstrom 89).
Poland: Bulka – Wisniewski (Lewandowski 88), Bednarek, Kiwior; Cash (Skoras 76), Nowak, Zielinski (Urbanski 76), Puchacz (Frankowski 65); Szymanski (Swiderski 76), Zukowski, Zalewski.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sweden	2	2	0	0	5	2	6
Bosnia & Herz	2	1	1	0	4	2	4
Poland	2	0	1	1	1	3	1
Romania	2	0	0	2	3	6	0

League C

Group C1

Sep 26 – Serravalle
San Marino 0
Finland 7 (Pohjanpalo 5, 79, 88 pen, Svanback 14, Kallman 33, Walta 50, 55)
San Marino: Colombo – Fabbri (Della Balda 70), Cevoli (Benvenuti 79), Pasolini, Tosi; L. Capicchioni (Mularoni 59); Meloni, Zannoni (Giocondi 70), Golinucci; Giacopetti (Pancotti 59), Nanni.
Sent off: Golinucci 55.
Finland: Sinisalo – Keskinen (Stahl 46), Koski (T. Miettinen 46), S. Miettinen, Lahteenmaki; Kairinen, Markhiyev (Vaananen 46), Walta (Valakari 70); Svanback, Pohjanpalo, Kallman (Lod 59).

Sep 26 – Tirana
Albania 2 (Asllani 34 pen, Muci 45+2)
Belarus 0
Albania: E. Berisha – Hysaj, Ismajli, Djimsiti, Pilios; Ramadani, Asllani (Shehu 86); Seferi, (Uzuni 61), Muci (Mehmeti 74), Hoxha (Mitaj 86); Manaj (Daku 74).
Belarus: Lapoukhov – Kalinin, Volkov, Tikhomirov (Gomanov 46), Pechenin; Selyava (Svirepa 65), Ebong; Kontsevoy (Kovalev 46), Gromyko (Lisakovich 65), Malashevich; Barkovskiy (Simanenka 85).

Sep 29 – Helsinki
Finland 0
Belarus 0
Finland: Hradecky – Stahl, T. Miettinen, Koski, Lahteenmaki; Kairinen, Markhiyev (Vaananen 66), Kamara (Hakans 46); Walta (Suhonen 66), Pohjanpalo (Kallman 59), Keskinen (Svanback 88).
Belarus: Lapoukhov – Kalinin, Volkov, Gomanov, Pechenin; Lukashov, Selyava (Yablonskiy 87), Ebong, Shumanskiy (Kovalev 61); Barkovskiy (Melnichenko 61), Lisakovich (Gromyko 62).

Sep 29 – Serravalle
San Marino 0
Albania 3 (Mehmeti 21, Uzuni 27, Manaj 65)
San Marino: Colombo – Benvenuti, Cevoli (Fabbri 60), Rossi, Giocondi; Mularoni, L. Capicchioni (Meloni 60), Lazzari (Della Balda 60), Pancotti (Zannoni 74); Nanni, G. Capicchioni (Giacopetti 78).
Albania: Sherri – Samuele, Ismajli, Djimsiti (Kumbulla 46), Mitaj; Shehu (Qefalija 74), Asllani; Uzuni, Muci (Hoxha 66), Mehmeti (Hasa 80); Manaj (Shpendi 66).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Albania	2	2	0	0	5	0	6
Finland	2	1	1	0	7	0	4
Belarus	2	0	1	1	0	2	1
San Marino	2	0	0	2	0	10	0

Group C2

Sep 25 – Yerevan
Armenia 2 (Harutyunyan 31, Gharibyan 75)
Latvia 0
Armenia: Cancarevic – Bandikyan, Piloyan, Julio (Petrosyan 46), Harutyunyan (Simonyan 82), Tiknizyan; Serobyan (Sevikyan 82), Iwu, Spertsyan, Hovhannisyan (Shaghoyan 60); Miranyan (Gharibyan 69).
Latvia: Matrevics – Melniks, Cernomordijs (Patijcuks 87), Cirkin; Jurkovskis (Tonisevs 58), Vapne, Zelenkovs, Ciganiks; Daskevics (Vientiess 68), Gutkovskis (Aleksanjan 87), Strods (Uldrikis 68).

Sep 25 – Podgorica
Montenegro 2 (Krstovic 66 pen, Osmajic 86)
Cyprus 1 (Edwards 55)
Montenegro: Popovic – Roganovic, Savic, Vujacic, Gasevic (Vesovic 60); Jankovic (Brnovic 89), Bulatovic, Adzic (Vukovic 71); Osmajic, Krstovic (Loncar 89), Jovetic (Vukotic 59).
Cyprus: Fabiano – Shikkis (Tsaroulla 46), Sotiriou, Panagiotou (Neophytou 90+1), Malekkides; Kyprianou; Edwards (Loizou 70), Andreou (Konomis 71), Kastanos, Tzionis (Georgiou 71); Pittas.

Sep 28 – Yerevan
Armenia 2 (Serobyan 34, Spertsyan 65)
Montenegro 3 (Piloyan 20 og, Krstovic 38, Latkovic 89)
Armenia: Cancarevic – Bandikyan, Piloyan (Manvelyan 90+2), Petrosyan, Harutyunyan, Tiknizyan; Serobyan (Sevikyan 70), Iwu, Spertsyan, Shaghoyan (Hovhannisyan 46); Miranyan (Gharibyan 55).
Montenegro: Popovic – Roganovic (Latkovic 69), Djuric, Savic, Gasevic (Radunovic 68); Jankovic; Vukovic (Vesovic 54), Loncar (Adzic 68), Bulatovic; Krstovic, Osmajic (Jovetic 79).

Sep 28 – Riga
Latvia 0
Cyprus 0
Latvia: Matrevics – Savalnieks, Melniks, Cirkin, Cernomordijs, Ciganiks; Zelenkovs, Emsis (Strods 78), Vapne; Gutkovskis (Daskevics 78), Uldrikis.
Cyprus: Fabiano – Tsaroulla (Pileas 85), Sotiriou, Panagiotou, Malekkides; Artymatas (Kyprianou 74), Kastanos; Edwards, Kosti (Kakoullis 86), Loizou (Tzionis 74); Pittas.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Montenegro	2	2	0	0	5	3	6
Armenia	2	1	0	1	4	3	3
Cyprus	2	0	1	1	1	2	1
Latvia	2	0	1	1	0	2	1

Group C3

Sep 26 – Torshavn
Faroe Islands 1 (Samuelsen 14)
Kazakhstan 1 (Erlanov 26)
Faroe Islands: Lamhauge – Danielsen, Faero, Vatnhamar, Edmundsson, Agnarsson; Samuelsen (Kallsberg 80), Turi (Hellisdal 80), Bjartalid, Sorensen; Knudsen (Justinussen 65).
Kazakhstan: Pokatilov – Mrynskiy, Erlanov, Alip, Vorogovskiy; Kuat, Karaman, Islamkhan (Orazov 73); Amir (Astanov 62), Shushenachev (Bekbolat 81), Kenzhebek (Basmanov 62).

Sep 26 – Presov
Slovakia 2 (Schranz 32, Duda 40 pen)
Moldova 0
Slovakia: Greif – Schranz (Valjent 63), Skriniar, Obert, Hancko (Vavro 72); Suslov, Lobotka, Duda; Kapralik (Sauer 63), Strelec (Prekop 72), Haraslin (Rigo 82).
Moldova: Celeadnic – Iovu, Baboglo (Stefan 74), Gherasimencov; Forov (Turcan 74), Motpan, Rata (Dros 66), Stina (Fratea 55), Reabciuk; Clescenco (Bodisteanu 55); Popescu.

Sep 29 – Chisinau
Moldova 1 (Perciun 66)
Faroe Islands 1 (Davidsen 26 pen)
Moldova: Celeadnic – Cucos, Iovu, Gherasimencov; Forov (Perciun 52), Fratea (Bodisteanu 74), Baboglo (Rata 52), Stina (Motpan 52), Reabciuk; Mandricenco (Clescenco 46); Popescu.
Faroe Islands: Lamhauge – J. Benjaminsen, Chukwudi, Vatnhamar, Edmundsson, Davidsen (Agnarsson 75); Samuelsen (A. Benjaminsen 85), Hellisdal (Joensen 85), Turi (Knudsen 61), Sorensen (Bjartalid 61); Justinussen.

Sep 29 – Kosice
Slovakia 2 (Sauer 26, Hancko 82)
Kazakhstan 1 (Karimov 35)
Slovakia: Dubravka – Valjent (Duris 90+1), Skriniar, Obert, Hancko; Suslov (Rigo 90+1), Lobotka, Duda; Sauer (Bobcek 66), Strelec (Bozenik 75), Haraslin (Schranz 75).
Kazakhstan: Pokatilov – Ashirbek (Astanov 86), Erlanov, Alip, Zhagorov; Kuat (Kasabulat 72), Karaman; Bekbolat (Mrynskiy, 46), Amir (Orazov 60), Basmanov (Kenzhebek 60); Karimov.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Slovakia	2	2	0	0	4	1	6
Faroe Islands	2	0	2	0	2	2	2
Kazakhstan	2	0	1	1	2	3	1
Moldova	2	0	1	1	1	3	1

Group C4

Sep 26 – Plovdiv
Bulgaria 1 (Chandarov 18)
Luxembourg 2 (Barreiro 37, V. Thill 65)
Bulgaria: Naumov – Turitsov, K. Dimitrov, T. Ivanov (Velkov 82), Velkovski; Tsenov (Panayotov 68), Gruev, Chandarov (Minchev 56); Rusev (S. Petkov 46), L. Petkov, Z. Dimitrov (M. Petkov 68).
Luxembourg: Moris – Jans, Mahmutovic, Carlson, Bohnert; Cruz (Goncalves 90+1), Barreiro; V. Thill (Olesen 72), Sinani (Rupil 46), Dardari (Videira 83); Kadamani (S. Thill 83).

Sep 26 – Reykjavik
Iceland 1 (A. Gudjohnsen 45)
Estonia 1 (Paskotsi 64)
Iceland: Valdimarsson – Palsson, Thordarson, Gretarsson, Ellertsson (Tomasson 84); Thorsteinsson (A. Sigurdsson 75), Haraldsson, Johannesson (G. Sigurdsson 75), Gudmundsson (Thorvaldsson 30); A. Gudjohnsen (Ingason 85), Oskarsson.
Estonia: Hein – Peetson, Paskotsi, Kuusk, Mets, Schjonning-Larsen; Palumets, Poom, Kait (Soomets 86); Ainsalu (Kristal 61), Mustmaa (Tamm 78).

Sep 29 – Plovdiv
Bulgaria 0
Estonia 0
Bulgaria: Naumov – Turitsov (Y. Stoyanov 73), K. Dimitrov, Velkov, Velkovski; Gruev, K. Stoyanov (Panayotov 46); M. Petkov (S. Ivanov 70), Tsonev (Chandarov 46), Z. Dimitrov (Balov 46); L. Petkov.
Estonia: Hein – Saarma (Liivak 74), Paskotsi, Tougjas, Mets, Schjonning-Larsen; Soomets (Palumets, 58), Poom, Kait (Miller 58); Mustmaa (Mannilaan 46), Kristal.

Sep 29 – Luxembourg City
Luxembourg 0
Iceland 3 (A. Gudjohnsen 13, Oskarsson 39, Palsson 73)
Luxembourg: Moris – Jans (Martins 15), Mahmutovic, Carlson, Bohnert; Olesen (Dos Santos 62); V. Thill (Videira 62), Cruz (Rupil 76), Barreiro, Kadamani (Natami 76); Dardari.
Iceland: Valdimarsson – Palsson (A. Sigurdsson 85), Thordarson (Magnusson 67), Gretarsson, Tomasson; Ellertsson, G. Sigurdsson, Johannesson, Haraldsson (Thorvaldsson 75); A. Gudjohnsen (Andersen 75), Oskarsson (Willumsson 74).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Iceland	2	1	1	0	4	1	4
Luxembourg	2	1	0	1	2	4	3
Estonia	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
Bulgaria	2	0	1	1	1	2	1

League D

Group D1

Sep 24 – Encamp
Andorra 1 (Lopez 17)
Malta 2 (Cardona 36, Teuma 81)
Andorra: Alvarez – Borra, Llovera, Olivera, San Nicolas (Cornella 87); Remolins (Vales 87), Babot, Izquierdo (Alaez 67), Rodrigo; Sola (Martinez 76), Lopez (Berto 67).
Malta: Bonello – Muscat (Corbalan 46), Shaw, Pepe, Camenzuli; Guillaumier, Satariano (Paiber 75); Chouaref, Teuma (Grech 89), P. Mbong (Ewurum 75); Cardona.

Sep 27 – Europa Point
Gibraltar 0
Andorra 0
Gibraltar: Banda – Bent, Lopes, Valarino (Pons 78); Ronan, Mason (Richards 57), Torrilla, Pozo (Jolley 63), Scanlon (Bartolo 78); De Barr, Borge (Gomez 57).
Andorra: Alvarez – Borra, Llovera, Olivera, San Nicolas; Izquierdo (Guillen 69), Babot; Alaez (Remolins 63), Lopez (Martinez 87), Rodrigo; Sola (Berto 63).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Malta	1	1	0	0	2	1	3
Gibraltar	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
Andorra	2	0	1	1	1	2	1

Group D2

Sep 24 – Vaduz
Liechtenstein 0
Lithuania 2 (Michelbrink 53, Dolznikov 66)
Liechtenstein: B. Buchel – N. Hasler, Weissenhofer, Traber, Goppel, Zund (Poitner 88); Sele (Schlegel 73), M. Buchel (Netzer 88), A. Hasler; Luque-Notaro (Kindle 73), Saglam (A. Lo Russo 61).
Lithuania: Bartkus – Sirvys (Lickunas 61), Kazukolovas, Utkus, Tutyskinas; Gineitis, Vorobjovas (Burba 46), Michelbrink; Jankauskas (Dolznikov 61), Kucys (Ruzgis 73), Lasickas (Baltrunas 84).

Sep 27 – Kaunas
Lithuania 1 (Kucys 9 pen)
Azerbaijan 1 (Emreli 14)
Lithuania: Bartkus – Armalas, Utkus, Tutyskinas; Lickunas (Burba 66), Michelbrink (Vorobjovas 66), Gineitis, Lasickas; Slivka (Sluta 57), Kucys (Venckus 77), Dolznikov (Jankauskas 77).
Azerbaijan: Balayev – Mutallimov (Isgandarli 87), R. Mammadov, B. Huseynov, Dasdamirov, Abbasov (Bayramov 60); Emreli, Xaybulayev (C. Huseynov 90+2), Safarov (Abdullazade 46), Isayev; Dadashov (Qurbanli 60).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lithuania	2	1	1	0	3	1	4
Azerbaijan	1	0	1	0	1	1	1
Liechtenstein	1	0	0	1	0	2	0

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2026-27 CONCACAF NATIONS LEAGUE

League A

Group A

Sep 24 – Santiago de los Caballeros
Dominican Republic 3 (Morschel 5, Diaz 15, Rosario 90+7)
Nicaragua 2 (Perez 40, Bonilla 84)

Sep 24 – Kingston
Haiti 3 (Picault 23, Metusala 90+1, Isidor 90+8)
Trinidad & Tobago 2 (Frederick 31, Garcia 59)

Sep 24 – Tibas
Costa Rica 3 (Sinclair 3, Mora 23, 45+1)
Curacao 4 (Gorre 62, 78, Chong 66, Paulina 82)

Sep 27 – Kingston
Haiti 2 (Bellegarde 9, Calvo 39 og)
Costa Rica 0

Sep 27 – Willemstad
Curacao 6 (Comenencia 6, Gorre 11, 39, L. Bacuna 19, J. Bacuna 27, Locadia 88)
Nicaragua 1 (Moreno 62)

Sep 27 – Port of Spain
Trinidad & Tobago 1 (Phillips 37)
Dominican Republic 2 (Morschel 42, Diaz 50)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Curacao	2	2	0	0	10	4	6
Haiti	2	2	0	0	5	2	6
Dominican Rep	2	2	0	0	5	3	6
Trinidad & Tob	2	0	0	2	3	5	0
Costa Rica	2	0	0	2	3	6	0
Nicaragua	2	0	0	2	3	9	0

Group B

Sep 25 – Kingston
Jamaica 3 (Palmer 37, Burrell 53, Cephas 90+4)
Guatemala 2 (Santis 2, 67)

Sep 25 – Tegucigalpa
Honduras 2 (Moncada 20, Rochez 23)
Suriname 3 (Lonwijk 18, Jubitana 39, Palma 66 og)

Sep 25 – San Salvador
El Salvador 3 (Gil 8, 18, Osorio 29)
Martinique 1 (Antiste 51 pen)

Sep 28 – Paramaribo
Suriname 2 (Lonwijk 54, Kerk 69)
Martinique 1 (Moltenis 81)

Sep 28 – Kingston
Jamaica 0
Honduras 1 (Figueroa 14)

Sep 28 – Guatemala City
Guatemala 6 (Lom 8, Rubin 28, Fajardo 32, 89, 90+2, Aparicio 56)
El Salvador 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Suriname	2	2	0	0	5	3	6
Guatemala	2	1	0	1	8	3	3
Honduras	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Jamaica	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
El Salvador	2	1	0	1	3	7	3
Martinique	2	0	0	2	2	5	0

League B

Group A

Sep 24 – Roseau
Puerto Rico 0
Guyana 1 (De Rosario 78 pen)

Sep 24 – Roseau
Cayman Islands 0
Dominica 0

Sep 27 – Roseau
Guyana 2 (Gordon 16, De Rosario 36)
Cayman Islands 0

Sep 27 – Roseau
Dominica 0
Puerto Rico 2 (Sulia 4, Rivera 37)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Guyana	2	2	0	0	3	0	6
Puerto Rico	2	1	0	1	2	1	3
Cayman Islands	2	0	1	1	0	2	1
Dominica	2	0	1	1	0	2	1

Group B

Sep 25 – Gros Islet
Bermuda 1 (Russell 18 pen)
Guadeloupe 2 (Vulgaire 84, Boisne 89)

Sep 25 – Gros Islet
Barbados 2 (Gale 8 pen, Reid-Stephen 73)
Saint Lucia 0

Sep 28 – Gros Islet
Guadeloupe 2 (Boisne 49, 90+1)
Barbados 2 (Gale 76, Reid-Stephen 78)

Sep 28 – Gros Islet
Saint Lucia 5 (Caull 15, 18, 35, Byron 53, Frederick 68)
Bermuda 2 (Burchall 45+1, Robinson 70)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Barbados	2	1	1	0	4	2	4
Guadeloupe	2	1	1	0	4	3	4
Saint Lucia	2	1	0	1	5	4	3
Bermuda	2	0	0	2	3	7	0

Group C

Sep 25 – Basseterre
Grenada 0
Cuba 3 (Sandiford 19 og, Diaz 90+1, Reinoso 90+4)

Sep 25 – Basseterre
Bonaire 1 (Sonnenschein 7)
St Kitts & Nevis 2 (Williams 36, 89)

Sep 28 – Basseterre
Cuba 2 (Matos 3, Catasus 49)
Bonaire 0

Sep 28 – Basseterre
St Kitts & Nevis 3 (Williams 11, 17, 76 pen)
Grenada 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cuba	2	2	0	0	5	0	6
St Kitts & Nevis	2	2	0	0	5	1	6
Bonaire	2	0	0	2	1	4	0
Grenada	2	0	0	2	0	6	0

Group D

Sep 26 – Belmopan
St Vincent & Grenadines 2 (Anderson 14, 29)
French Guiana 1 (Nozile 63)

Sep 26 – Belmopan
Sint Maarten 0
Belize 1 (Guerra 52)

Sep 29 – Belmopan
French Guiana 1 (Haabo 90+5)
Sint Maarten 0

Sep 29 – Belmopan
Belize 0
St Vincent & Grenadines 1 (Johnson 10)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
St Vincent & Gren	2	2	0	0	3	1	6
French Guiana	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Belize	2	1	0	1	1	1	3
Sint Maarten	2	0	0	2	0	2	0

League C

Group A

Sep 23 – Providenciales
Turks & Caicos 0
Montserrat 2 (Boatswain 41, 69)

Sep 26 – Providenciales
Montserrat 3 (Barzey 58, Taylor 67, 71)
British Virgin Islands 0

Sep 29 – Providenciales
British Virgin Islands 0
Turks & Caicos 3 (Forbes 9, 74, Paul 52)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Montserrat	2	2	0	0	5	0	6
Turks & Caicos	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
BVI	2	0	0	2	0	6	0

Group B

Sep 23 – St George
Aruba 1 (Molina 90+3)
Antigua & Barbuda 0

Sep 26 – St George
Antigua & Barbuda 5 (Douglas 1, 21, Pereira 16, Bishop 35, George 43)
Anguilla 0

Sep 29 – St George
Anguilla 0
Aruba 2 (Ostiana 53, Figaroa 88)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Aruba	2	2	0	0	3	0	6
Antigua & Bar	2	1	0	1	5	1	3
Anguilla	2	0	0	2	0	7	0

Group C

Sep 23 – Upper Bethlemen
Bahamas 0
Saint Martin 8 (Raga 15, 52, 63 pen, Alexandre 20, 32, Montantin 23, Butler 41 og, Arne 80)

Sep 26 – Upper Bethlemen
Saint Martin 0
US Virgin Islands 2 (Liburd 18, 83)

Sep 29 – Upper Bethlemen
US Virgin Islands 3 (St Louis 14, Joseph 45+3, Armour 62)
Bahamas 1 (Rahming 68)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
USVI	2	2	0	0	5	1	6
Saint Martin	2	1	0	1	8	2	3
Bahamas	2	0	0	2	1	11	0

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2027 AFCON QUALIFIERS

Group A

Sep 25 – Accra
Niger 2 (Sosah 38, Sako 45)
Lesotho 1 (Motebang 85 pen)

Sep 25 – Rabat
Morocco 2 (Mazraoui 36, Rahimi 84)
Gabon 0

Sep 29 – Franceville
Gabon 2 (Effaghe 53, Bouanga 77)
Niger 0

Sep 29 – Bloemfontein
Lesotho 0
Morocco 2 (Brahim 45, Ounahi 82)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Morocco	2	2	0	0	4	0	6
Gabon	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Niger	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Lesotho	2	0	0	2	1	4	0

Group B

Sep 25 – Cairo
Egypt 0
Angola 0

Sep 25 – Lilongwe
Malawi 2 (Adepoju 20, Njaliwa 64)
South Sudan 1 (Dhata 48)

Sep 29 – Juba
South Sudan 0
Egypt 5 (Zico 36, Marmoush 49, 83, Adel 75, Abdelkarim 90+2)

Oct 6 – Luanda
Angola 3 (Milson 3, Mabululu 38, Miro 45+2)
Malawi 1 (Gaspar 45+1 og)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Egypt	2	1	1	0	5	0	4
Angola	2	1	1	0	3	1	4
Malawi	2	1	0	1	3	4	3
South Sudan	2	0	0	2	1	7	0

Group C

Sep 24 – Bouake
Ivory Coast 2 (Yalcouye 44, Kessie 58 pen)
Ghana 0

Sep 25 – Bakau
Gambia 2 (E. Colley 18 pen, Badamosi 83)
Somalia 1 (Njie 72)

Sep 29 – Accra
Ghana 2 (Nuamah 27 pen, Afena-Gyan 33)
Gambia 4 (Badamosi 37 pen, O. Colley 42, E. Colley 68, 90+1)

Sep 29 – Abidjan
Somalia 0
Ivory Coast 2 (Gboho 89, Toure 90+5)

Latest Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ivory Coast	2	2	0	0	4	0	6
Gambia	2	2	0	0	1	3	6
Somalia	2	0	0	2	6	4	0
Ghana	2	0	0	2	2	6	0

Group D

Sep 26 – Nairobi
Kenya 1 (Ogam 87)
Eritrea 1 (Netabay 36)

Sep 26 – Johannesburg
South Africa 2 (Okon 30, Kabini 77)
Guinea 1 (Cisse 69)

Sep 30 – Cairo
Eritrea 0
South Africa 5 (Mofokeng 19, 45+1, Sithole 52, Rayners 63, Singh 90+4)

Oct 1 – Conakry
Guinea 1 (Guirassy 32)
Kenya 0

Latest Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
South Africa	2	2	0	0	7	1	6
Guinea	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Kenya	2	0	1	1	1	2	1
Eritrea	2	0	1	1	1	6	1

Group E

Sep 24 – Kinshasa
DR Congo 2 (Mbemba 4, Wissa 72)
Equatorial Guinea 0

Sep 24 – El Jadida
Sierra Leone 2 (Conteh 7, Tarawallie 27)
Zimbabwe 3 (Munetsi 72, 88, Chirewa 76)

Sep 28 – Yaounde
Equatorial Guinea 1 (Zuniga 1)
Sierra Leone 0

Sep 28 – Harare
Zimbabwe 1 (Munetsi 90+3)
DR Congo 2 (Wissa 30, Moutoussamy 45+2)

Latest Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
DR Congo	2	2	0	0	4	1	6
Zimbabwe	2	1	0	1	4	4	3
Eq Guinea	2	1	0	1	1	2	3
Sierra Leone	2	0	0	2	2	4	0

Group F

Sep 24 – Casablanca
Mauritania 3 (Koita 32 pen, Camara 69, Diallo 89)
Central African Republic 1 (Koyalipou 48)

Sep 25 – Ouagadougou
Burkina Faso 1 (Traore 20 pen)
Benin 1 (Tosin 69 pen)

Sep 28 – Casablanca
Central African Republic 0
Burkina Faso 1 (Camara 60)

Sep 29 – Abidjan
Benin 2 (Aloko 31, 46)
Mauritania 1 (Koita 80 pen)

Latest Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Benin	2	1	1	0	3	2	4
Burkina Faso	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Mauritania	2	1	0	1	4	3	3
Central African Rep	2	0	0	2	1	4	0

Group G

Sep 24 – Gaborone
Namibia 1 (Muzeu)
Congo 0

Sep 24 – Garoua
Cameroon 3 (Nyengue 39, Mbeumo 48, Namaso 81)
Comoros 1 (Omari 51)

Sep 29 – Iconi
Comoros 1 (Youssouf 53)
Namibia 0

Sep 29 – Brazzaville
Congo 1 (Bantsiele 24)
Cameroon 1 (Zinga 53 og)

Latest Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cameroon	2	1	1	0	4	2	4
Comoros	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Namibia	2	1	0	1	1	1	3
Congo	2	0	1	1	1	2	1

Group H

Sep 24 – Tripoli
Libya 2 (Alhibeeshi 87, El Maremi 90+6 pen)
Botswana 2 (Orebonye 30, 42)

Sep 24 – Rades
Tunisia 1 (Arous 12)
Uganda 1 (Mato 68)

Sep 28 – Rades
Tunisia 2 (Mastouri 44, 49)
Botswana 2 (Kgamanyane 37, Ditsele 60)

Sep 29 – Hoima
Uganda 1 (Vula 45+2)
Libya 0

Latest Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Uganda	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Botswana	2	0	2	0	4	4	2
Tunisia	2	0	2	0	3	3	2
Libya	2	0	1	1	2	3	1

Group I

Sep 25 – Tizi Ouzou
Algeria 3 (Hadjam 2, Maza 67, Hadj Moussa 74)
Zambia 1 (Sakala 57)

Sep 25 – Lome
Togo 1 (Karim 17)
Burundi 0

Sep 29 – Bujumbura
Burundi 2 (Chaibi 5 og, Girumugisha 12)
Algeria 2 (Belloumi 30, Boulbina 63)

Sep 29 – Ndola
Zambia 2 (Kangwanda 2, Mandanji 90+5)
Togo 0

Latest Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Algeria	2	1	1	0	5	3	4
Zambia	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Togo	2	1	0	1	1	2	3
Burundi	2	0	1	1	2	3	1

Group J

Sep 25 – Maputo
Mozambique 1 (Catamo 45+2)
Senegal 1 (Jackson 32)

Sep 25 – Juba
Sudan 1 (Eisa 86)
Ethiopia 0

Sep 29 – Bahir Dar
Ethiopia 0
Senegal 1 (Mbaye 11)

Sep 29 – Maputo
Mozambique 4 (Witi 24, Chamito 46, 62, Guima 58)
Sudan 1 (Hamed 88 pen)

Latest Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mozambique	2	1	1	0	5	2	4
Senegal	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Sudan	2	1	0	1	2	4	3
Ethiopia	2	0	0	2	0	2	0

Group K

Sep 25 – Bamako
Mali 3 (Tia 5, Nene 39, 51)
Cape Verde 1 (Lopes Cabral 10)

Sep 25 – Kigali
Rwanda 3 (Biramahire 2, L. Mickels 33, J. Mickels 44 pen)
Liberia 1 (Nimely 38)

Sep 29 – Praia
Cape Verde 1 (Benchimol 40)
Rwanda 2 (Niyomugabo 45+2, Iradukunda 52)

Sep 29 – Monrovia
Liberia 0
Mali 1 (Tia 79)

Latest Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Rwanda	2	2	0	0	5	2	6
Mali	2	2	0	0	4	1	6
Cape Verde	2	0	0	2	2	5	0
Liberia	2	0	0	2	1	4	0

Group L

Sep 25 – Uyo
Nigeria 2 (Ilenikhena 45+1, Usor 65)
Madagascar 1 (Kari 16)

Sep 25 – Zanzibar City
Tanzania 0
Guinea-Bissau 2 (Franculino 33, Balde 58)

Sep 29 – Bissau
Guinea-Bissau 3 (Dju 15, Mam. Balde 66, A. Djalo 90+5)
Nigeria 0

Sep 29 – Meknes
Madagascar 1 (Fontaine 50)
Tanzania 1 (Kachwele 39)

Latest Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Guinea-Bissau	2	2	0	0	5	0	6
Nigeria	2	1	0	1	2	4	3
Madagascar	2	0	1	1	2	3	1
Tanzania	2	0	1	1	1	3	1

2026 FIFA ASEAN CUP

ASEAN Cup

Group A

Sep 25 – Jakarta
Bangladesh 0
Malaysia 3 (Arif 18, 37, Bergson 52)

Sep 25 – Jakarta
Indonesia 2 (Oratmangoen 13, Romeny 74 pen)
Singapore 0

Sep 28 – Jakarta
Singapore 1 (H. Stewart 35)
Bangladesh 0

Sep 28 – Jakarta
Malaysia 0
Indonesia 0

Oct 1 – Jakarta
Indonesia 9 (Baker 11, 20, 37, 42, 90+7, Ridho 32, Hubner 45+1, Vickery 90, Diks 90+6)
Bangladesh 2 (Emon 36, Wahid 90+1)

Oct 1 – Bandung
Malaysia 6 (Bergson 8 pen, 62, 90+3, Wilkin 26, Josue 76, Bashah 87)
Singapore 0

Final Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Indonesia*	3	2	1	0	11	2	7
Malaysia**	3	2	1	0	9	0	7
Singapore	3	1	0	2	1	8	3
Bangladesh	3	0	0	3	2	13	0

**Advance to final*
***Advance to third place play-off*

Group B

Sep 26 – Bandung
Pakistan 0
Thailand 4 (Teerasak 31, 84, Soonsup-Bell 41, Zeb 64 og)

Sep 26 – Bandung
Vietnam 1 (Nguyen Dinh Bac 5)
Philippines 0

Sep 29 – Bandung
Philippines 2 (Reyes 24, Kristensen 32 pen)
Pakistan 2 (A. Khan 47, Arshad 62)

Sep 29 – Bandung
Thailand 2 (Sarach 10, Chaiyaphon 90+2)
Vietnam 0

Oct 2 – Bandung
Thailand 1 (Iklas 55)
Philippines 2 (Kristensen 3, 68)

Oct 2 – Jakarta
Vietnam 4 (Nguyen Hai Long 51, Nguyen Hoang Duc 57, Nguyen Dinh Bac 80, Williams 90+1)
Pakistan 2 (Mohib 31, A. Khan 88)

Final Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Thailand*	3	2	0	1	7	2	6
Vietnam**	3	2	0	1	5	4	6
Philippines	3	1	1	1	4	4	4
Pakistan	3	0	1	2	4	10	1

**Advance to final*
***Advance to third place play-off*

Third Place Play-Off

Oct 5 – Jakarta
Malaysia 1 (Tierney 62)
Vietnam 0

Final

Oct 5 – Jakarta
Indonesia 2 (James 84, Baggott 116)
Thailand 2 (Iklas 87, Peeradol 111)
After Extra-Time; Indonesia win 4-2 on pens

ASEAN Challenge Cup

Group A

Sep 24 – Kowloon
Laos 3 (Bounphachan 4 pen, Xayasith 24, Bounchay 67)
Brunei 1 (Haziq 45+1)

Sep 27 – Kowloon
Hong Kong 4 (Sun Ming Him 12, Camargo 33, Dudu 55, Orr 90+1 pen)
Laos 0

Sep 30 – Kowloon
Brunei 0
Hong Kong 2 (Chan Siu Kwan 60, Orr 90+1)

Final Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Hong Kong*	2	2	0	0	6	0	6
Laos	2	1	0	1	3	5	3
Brunei	2	0	0	2	1	5	0

**Advance to final*

Group B

Sep 24 – Kowloon
Myanmar 2 (Win Naing Tun 19, Than Paing 75)
Timor Leste 0

Sep 27 – Kowloon
Cambodia 1 (Kakada 90+4)
Myanmar 0

Sep 30 – Kowloon
Timor Leste 2 (Joao Pedro 17, Bakhito 58)
Cambodia 2 (Nieto 28, 38 pen)

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Final Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cambodia*	2	1	1	0	3	2	4
Myanmar	2	1	0	1	2	1	3
Timor-Leste	2	0	1	1	2	4	1

*Advance to final

Final

Oct 3 – Kowloon
Hong Kong 2 (Orr 41, Everton 58 pen)
Cambodia 0

27TH ARABIAN GULF CUP

Group A

Sep 23 – Jeddah
Iraq 1 (Qasim 6)
Oman 1 (Al Rawahi 67)

Sep 23 – Jeddah
Saudi Arabia 1 (Al Haqan 73 og)
Kuwait 0

Sep 26 – Jeddah
Kuwait 2 (Nasser 75 pen, 90)
Iraq 3 (Iqbal 52, Rasheed 83, Nabeel 90+9)

Sep 26 – Jeddah
Oman 0
Saudi Arabia 3 (Al Buraikan 11, 34, Kadesh 18)

Sep 29 – Jeddah
Saudi Arabia 2 (Al Salem 54, Al Hamdan 69)
Iraq 0

Sep 29 – Jeddah
Oman 3 (Al Rawahi 65, 81, Al Shaqsy 84)
Kuwait 1 (Al Khaldi 6)

Final Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Saudi Arabia*	3	3	0	0	6	0	9
Oman**	3	1	1	1	4	5	4
Iraq	3	1	1	1	4	5	4
Kuwait	3	0	0	3	3	7	0

*Advance to next stage
**Advance based on the drawing of lots

Group B

Sep 24 – Jeddah
United Arab Emirates 4 (Gimenez 26, 51, Sahal 36 og, Luanzinho 45+4)
Yemen 0

Sep 24 – Jeddah
Qatar 2 (Khoukhi 61, Al Haydos 90+9 pen)
Bahrain 0

Sep 27 – Jeddah
Yemen 0
Qatar 1 (Abdurisag 64)

Sep 27 – Jeddah
Bahrain 0
United Arab Emirates 3 (Ousmane 30, Guilherme 66, Saleh 88)

Sep 30 – Jeddah
United Arab Emirates 1 (Saleh 45+4)
Qatar 1 (Ali 33)

Sep 30 – Jeddah
Bahrain 2 (Al Doseri 7, Madan 67)
Yemen 5 (Al Gahwashi 18, Al Matari 31, Al Wasmani 40, 90+5, Qasem 44)

Final Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
UAE*	3	2	1	0	8	1	7
Qatar*	3	2	1	0	4	1	7
Yemen	3	1	0	2	5	7	3
Bahrain	3	0	0	3	2	10	0

*Advance to next stage

Semi-Finals

Oct 3 – Jeddah
Saudi Arabia 0
Qatar 0
After Extra-Time; Saudi Arabia win 3-2 on pens

Oct 3 – Jeddah
United Arab Emirates 1 (Camara 22)
Oman 0

Final

Oct 6 – Jeddah
Saudi Arabia 2 (Al Hammami 11, Al Buraikan 13)
United Arab Emirates 0

FRIENDLIES

Sep 18 – Suva
Papua New Guinea 2 (Moses 85, Vela 89)
Vanuatu 1 (T. Kaltack 76)

Sep 18 – Suva
Fiji 3 (Krishna 27, Dau 43, Dunn 55)
Solomon Islands 3 (Riugaemai 41 pen, Patti 82, Wae 90+10)

Sep 21 – Suva
New Caledonia 0
Solomon Islands 2 (Le'ai 76, Wae 90+3)

Sep 21 – Suva
Fiji 0
Vanuatu 1 (K. Kaltack 70)

Sep 21 – Roseau
Dominica 1 (Cuffy 49)
Anguilla 0

Sep 23 – Baku
Azerbaijan 1 (Baklov 58 og)
Tajikistan 0

Sep 23 – Europa Point
Gibraltar 0
Sao Tome & Principe 0

Sep 24 – Rifu
Japan 3 (Matsuki 11, Shiogai 90+2, Ueda 90+6)
Uruguay 1 (M. Araujo 42)

Sep 24 – Suwon
South Korea 3 (Oh Hyeon-Gyu 54, Son Heung-Min 58, Lee Dong-Gyeong 86)
Ecuador 0

Sep 24 – Chongqing
China 3 (Wang Ziming 50, 56, 63)
Maldives 0

Sep 24 – Fergana
Uzbekistan 3 (Shomurodov 10, 58 pen, Norchaev 90+4)
Iran 1 (Urozov 49 og)

Sep 24 – Chongqing
Palestine 2 (Al Hamlawi 27, Dabbagh 39)
New Zealand 2 (Waine 5, Randall 35)

Sep 24 – Suva
Solomon Islands 3 (Deana 43, Le'ai 67, Wae 85)
Vanuatu 3 (Malakai 33, T. Kaltack 47, Bule 71)

Sep 24 – Suva
Papua New Guinea 1 (Kepo 17)
New Caledonia 2 (Dahite 12, Read 74)

Sep 25 – Townsville
Australia 1 (Irankunda 68)
Brazil 1 (Rayan 90+5)

Sep 25 – Bengaluru
India 1 (Williams 41)
Panama 1 (Valencia 68)

Sep 26 – Orlando
United States 4 (Ellis 4, Tillman 66 pen, Hall 72, Berhalter 90)
Peru 1 (Lapadula 15)

Sep 27 – Baltimore
Mexico 1 (Mora 62)
Colombia 1 (Suarez 9)

Sep 27 – Toronto
Canada 1 (J. David 12)
Chile 0

Sep 27 – Chongqing
China 0
New Zealand 3 (Bindon 4, Waine 29, Parker-Price 82)

Sep 27 – Washington D.C.
Bolivia 0
Paraguay 2 (Almiron 17, 48)

Sep 27 – Ta'Qali
Malta 2 (Grech 37, Zammit 63)
Liechtenstein 0

Sep 27 – Victoria
Seychelles 0
Sri Lanka 3 (Rajamohan 45+2 pen, 52, De Silva 76)

Sep 27 – Amman
Jordan 1 (Olwan 38)
Syria 1 (Moustfa 52)

Sep 27 – Suva
Fiji 2 (Krishna 18 pen, Vasconcellos 24)
Papua New Guinea 0

Sep 27 – Suva
Vanuatu 4 (T. Kaltack 24, Moses 79, Roqara 85, Soromon 90+3)
New Caledonia 1 (Decoire 14)

Sep 28 – Hiroshima
Japan 2 (Ueda 49, 90+6 pen)
Venezuela 1 (Kelsy 46)

Sep 28 – Seoul
South Korea 1 (Son Heung-min 80)
Uruguay 4 (Nunez 13, 62, De Arrascaeta 27, Kim Min-jae 43 og)

Sep 28 – Bishkek
Kyrgyzstan 5 (Atabaev 11, 23, Astanakulov 20, Murzakov 33, Kojo 42)
Maldives 0

Sep 29 – Brisbane
Australia 2 (Circati 28, Metcalfe 33)
Brazil 4 (Vanderson 3, Raphinha 45 pen, Bruno Guimaraes 69, Vinicius Junior 80 pen)

Sep 29 – Kazan
Russia 2 (Golovin 21, 36)
Iran 0

Sep 30 – St Louis
United States 4 (Berhalter 37, Hall 51, Richards 72, Albert 90+3)
Chile 2 (Ulloa 45+1, Gutierrez 49)

Sep 30 – Harrison
Mexico 1 (Guzman 49)
Peru 1 (Velez 26)

Sep 30 – Kaunas
Lithuania 3 (Ruzgis 21 pen, Steponavicius 27, Kucys 90+3)
Andorra 0

Sep 30 – Suva
Papua New Guinea 1 (Kepo 60)
Solomon Islands 1 (Le'ai 3 pen)

Sep 30 – Suva
Fiji 2 (Wara 50, Dau 66)
New Caledonia 1 (Read 40)

Sep 30 – Victoria
Seychelles 0
Sri Lanka 2 (De Silva 32, Razeek 84)

• *October's international friendly results will feature in the December issue*

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Club Football WORLD

2026 FIFA INTERCONTINENTAL CUP

African–Asian–Pacific Cup Play-Off

Aug 26 – Jeddah
Al Ahli (KSA) 1 (Abu Al Shamat 63)
Auckland FC (Nzl) 0

African–Asian–Pacific Cup

Sep 19 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 2 (Santos 17, 80)
Al Ahli (KSA) 1 (Williams 19 og)

EUROPE

2026-27 UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Matchday 1

Sep 8 – Athens
AEK Athens (Gre) 1 (Marin 21)
LASK (Aut) 0

Sep 8 – Brugge
Club Brugge (Bel) 2 (Vetlesen 19, Tresoldi 61 pen)
Aston Villa (Eng) 3 (McGinn 11, Buendia 22, Jackson 43)

Sep 8 – Dortmund
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 3 (Veiga 53 og, Guirassy 80, 85 pen)
Villarreal (Spa) 2 (Mourino 66, Guirassy 90+3 og)

Sep 8 – Porto
Porto (Por) 0
Manchester City (Eng) 2 (Haaland 47, 90+1)

Sep 8 – Lille
Lille (Fra) 2 (Ueda 12, Alexsandro 36)
Real Betis (Spa) 3 (Bartra 33, 49, Parrott 53)

Sep 8 – Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 2 (Mbappe 14, Valverde 23)
Internazionale (Ita) 1 (Carlos Augusto 77)

Sep 9 – Barcelona
Barcelona (Spa) 5 (Raphinha 3, 57, Adeyemi 22, Yamal 77, Gabriel Jesus 85)
Feyenoord (Ned) 1 (Steijn 82)

Sep 9 – Stuttgart
Stuttgart (Ger) 3 (Demirovic 20, 26, 32)
Viking (Nor) 1 (Tripic 22)

Sep 9 – Liverpool
Liverpool (Eng) 2 (Szoboszlai 40, Mac Allister 50)
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 1 (Llorente 17)

Sep 9 – Paris
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 6 (Dembele 17, 23, Ferran 31, 47, 57, Fabian 88)
Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 1 (Su. Camara 59)

Sep 9 – Lisbon
Sporting (Por) 3 (Catamo 27, Suarez 57 pen, Zalazar 63)
Galatasaray (Tur) 1 (Inacio 5 og)

Sep 9 – Naples
Napoli (Ita) 0
Arsenal (Eng) 1 (Odegaard 75)

Sep 10 – Istanbul
Fenerbahce (Tur) 1 (Brown 48)
Roma (Ita) 1 (Cristante 39)

Sep 10 – Eindhoven
PSV (Ned) 1 (Dest 48)
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 1 (Mendoza 45+1)

Sep 10 – Como
Como (Ita) 4 (Baturina 15, Douvikas 38, Diao 54, Perrone 90)
RB Leipzig (Ger) 1 (Maksimovic 58)

Sep 10 – Munich
Bayern Munich (Ger) 5 (Musiala 47, Kane 61, Davies 77, Olise 83, 90+2)
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 0

Sep 10 – Manchester
Manchester United (Eng) 4 (Matheus Cunha 27, Fernandes 42, Sesko 45, Martinez 68)
Sabah (Aze) 0

Sep 10 – Prague
Slavia Prague (Cze) 2 (Sturm 51, 88)
Lens (Fra) 3 (Sima 73, Thauvin 90+1, Aguilar 90+3)

2026-27 EUROPA LEAGUE

Sep 16 – Yerevan
Ararat-Armenia (Arm) 1 (Wilson 55)
Sparta Prague (Cze) 4 (Guddal 20, 22, Mercado 53, Vydra 71)

Sep 16 – Nicosia
Omonia (Cyp) 1 (Balkovec 88)
Celta Vigo (Spa) 0

Sep 16 – Milan
Milan (Ita) 0
Benfica (Por) 2 (Lukebakio 16, Kaminski 53)

Sep 16 – Leverkusen
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 2 (Seslar 15 og, Medina 74)
Celje (Svn) 0

Sep 16 – Bucharest
Hapoel Be'er Sheva (Isr) 0
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 0

Sep 16 – Piraeus
Olympiacos (Gre) 2 (Gonzalez 43, Yaremchuk 84)
Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 1 (Szmyt 20)

Sep 16 – Brussels
Anderlecht (Bel) 1 (Cvetkovic 61)
Lyon (Fra) 2 (Nartey 8, Nakamura 22)

Sep 16 – Graz
Sturm Graz (Aut) 0
Rennes (Fra) 0

Sep 16 – Sunderland
Sunderland (Eng) 1 (Le Fee 66 pen)
AZ (Ned) 0

Sep 17 – Heraklion
OFI (Gre) 2 (Cantalapiedra 30, Kanellopoulos 84)
Hoffenheim (Ger) 0

Sep 17 – Sofia
Levski Sofia (Bul) 0
Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 1 (Tabakovic 39)

Sep 17 – Istanbul
Besiktas (Tur) 4 (Fakili 15, Cerny 56, Murillo 59, Poku 81)
Marseille (Fra) 1 (Abdallah 30)

Sep 17 – Glasgow
Celtic (Sco) 1 (Baur 44)
Ferencvaros (Hun) 3 (Scales 20 og, Zachariassen 45+1, Arzani 47)

Sep 17 – London
Crystal Palace (Eng) 4 (Yeremy 10, Richards 27, Strand Larsen 34 pen, Nketiah 89)
Lech Poznan (Pol) 0

Sep 17 – Plzen
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 0
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 3 (Mofokeng 18, Biondic 43, Kricfalusi 59)

Sep 17 – Turin
Juventus (Ita) 5 (Gonazalez 9, Alajbegovic 24, Woltemade 35 pen, Celik 75, Kolo Muani 82)
NEC (Ned) 0

Sep 17 – Lillestrom
Lillestrom (Nor) 1 (Olsen 79)
Torreense (Por) 2 (Alfaro 23, Pozo 49)

Sep 17 – San Sebastian
Real Sociedad (Spa) 1 (Gomez 57)
Bournemouth (Eng) 2 (Kluivert 11, Rayan 20)

SOUTH AMERICA

2026 COPA LIBERTADORES

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Sep 8 – Rio de Janeiro
Fluminense (Bra) 2 (Nonato 21, Hulk 31)
Platense (Arg) 0

Sep 9 – La Plata
Estudiantes (Arg) 1 (Castro 4)
Corinthians (Bra) 1 (Kaio Cesar 49)

Sep 9 – Sao Paulo
Palmeiras (Bra) 1 (Giay 26)
LDU Quito (Ecu) 0

Sep 10 – Quito
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 0
Flamengo (Bra) 2 (Bruno Henrique 61, Leo Pereira 75)

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Sep 15 – Buenos Aires
Platense (Arg) 2 (Mainero 30, Sepulveda 45+2)
Fluminense (Bra) 1 (Canobbio 57)
Fluminense win 3-2 on aggregate

Sep 16 – Sao Paulo
Corinthians (Bra) 0
Estudiantes (Arg) 1 (Castro 87)
Estudiantes win 2-1 on aggregate

Sep 16 – Quito
LDU Quito (Ecu) 3 (Segovia 15, Estrada 90, 90+3)
Palmeiras (Bra) 2 (Marlon Freitas 10, Vitor Roque 73 pen)
3-3 on aggregate; Palmeiras win 4-3 on pens

Sep 17 – Rio de Janeiro
Flamengo (Bra) 1 (De Arrascaeta 83)
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 1 (Reasco 31)
Flamengo win 3-1 on aggregate

2026 COPA SUDAMERICANA

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Sep 8 – Buenos Aires
Boca Juniors (Arg) 1 (Merentiel 52)
Sao Paulo (Bra) 0

Sep 8 – Bogota
Santa Fe (Col) 0
Vasco da Gama (Bra) 0

Sep 9 – Santos
Santos (Bra) 2 (Arao 31, Oliva 68)
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 0

Sep 10 – Cusco
Cienciano (Per) 2 (Souza 28, Amondarain 42)
Montevideo City Torque (Uru) 0

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Sep 15 – Sao Paulo
Sao Paulo (Bra) 1 (Duarte 89)
Boca Juniors (Arg) 1 (Lozano 60)
Boca Juniors win 2-1 on aggregate

Sep 15 – Rio de Janeiro
Vasco da Gama (Bra) 2 (Bruno Duarte 37, David 65)
Santa Fe (Col) 0
Vasco da Gama win 2-0 on aggregate

Sep 16 – Belo Horizonte
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 4 (Bernard 1, Reinier 20, 41, Cuello 90+2)
Santos (Bra) 2 (Lyanco 28 og, Gabriel 72)
4-4 on aggregate; Atletico Mineiro win 3-1 on pens

Sep 17 – Montevideo
Montevideo City Torque (Uru) 3 (Rodriguez 38, 57, Da Silva 90+2)
Cienciano (Per) 0
Montevideo City Torque win 3-2 on aggregate

CONCACAF

2026 CAMPEONES CUP

Sep 16 – Miami
Inter Miami (USA) 2 (Messi 24, Casemiro 81)
Cruz Azul (Mex) 0

2026 CANADIAN CHAMPIONSHIP

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Sep 1 – Laval
Supra 1 (Conde 36)
Forge 1 (Krutzen 90+5)

Sep 2 – Vancouver
Vancouver Whitecaps 1 (Gauld 72)
CF Montreal 1 (Pereira 16)

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Sep 15 – Hamilton
Forge 1 (Paton 26)
Supra 0
Forge win 2-1 on aggregate

Sep 16 – Montreal
CF Montreal 2 (Owusu 30 pen, 45)
Vancouver Whitecaps 1 (Saabi 90+1)
CF Montreal win 3-2 on aggregate

2026 CONCACAF CARIBBEAN CUP

Group A

Sep 15:
Violette (Hai) 1-0 Club Sando (Tri);
Delfines del Este (Dom) 3-1 Defence Force (Tri)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Violette*	4	4	0	0	7	1	12
Club Sando*	4	2	1	1	4	2	7
Delfines del Este	4	1	2	1	3	2	5
Defence Force	4	1	0	3	3	9	3
Broki	4	0	1	3	3	6	1

**Advance to next stage*

Group B

Sep 17:
Mount Pleasant (Jam) 1-0 Cavalier (Jam);
Cibao (Dom) 1-2 Portmore United (Jam)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mount Pleasant*	4	2	1	1	4	3	7
Portmore United*	4	2	0	2	5	4	6
Salcedo	4	1	3	0	4	3	6
Cibao	4	1	2	1	4	4	5
Cavalier	4	0	2	2	0	3	2

**Advance to next stage*

2026 CENTRAL AMERICAN CUP

Quarter-Finals

Sep 9-10:
Saprissa (Crc) 2-2 Cartagines (Crc); Motagua (Hon) 3-0 Alianza (Slv); Firpo (Slv) 0-3 Olimpia (Hon); Marathon (Hon) 2-2 Alajuelense (Crc)

Sep 16-17:
Cartagines (Crc) 3-2 Saprissa (Crc) (agg 5-4); Alianza (Slv) 0-0 Motagua (Hon) (agg 0-3); Olimpia (Hon) 3-0 Firpo (Slv) (agg 6-0); Alajuelense (Crc) 3-1 Marathon (Hon) (agg 5-3)

Final Table 2026

DOMINICA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dublanc (C)	18	16	0	2	73	16	48
Southeast	18	12	1	5	51	26	37
Mahaut Soca Strikers	18	11	2	5	41	25	35
Bombers	18	10	3	5	44	36	33
WE United	18	6	1	11	32	46	19
Point Michel	18	6	1	11	47	65	19
Harlem United	18	6	1	11	22	41	19
Middleham United	18	5	3	10	30	46	18
Mighty Avengers (R)	18	5	3	10	23	44	18
Bath Estate (R)	18	5	1	12	33	51	16

ASIA

2026-27 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

West Region

League Stage

Sep 14 – Fergana
Neftchi (Uzb) 1 (Marusic 83)
Al Quwa Al Jawiya (Irq) 0

Sep 14 – Dubai
Shabab Al Ahli (UAE) 1 (Cesar 23)
Tractor (Irn) 0

Sep 14 – Al Khor
Al Shamal (Qat) 1 (Bounedjah 63)
Al Ittihad (KSA) 1 (Wijnaldum 90+4)

Sep 14 – Jeddah
Al Ahli (KSA) 1 (Al Buraikan 90+3)
Pakhtakor (Uzb) 1 (Flamarion 86)

Sep 14 – Basra
Esteghlal (Irn) 3 (Asani 9, Saharkhizan 47, Gholizadeh 90+5)
Al Sadd (Qat) 0

Sep 14 – Dammam
Al Qadsiah (KSA) 2 (Quinones 57, Retegui 61)
Al Wasl (UAE) 1 (Spadacio 90+6)

Sep 15 – Al Ain
Al Ain (UAE) 4 (H. Rahimi 25, 63, S. Rahimi 72, Giakoumakis 85)
Al Nassr (KSA) 0

Sep 15 – Riyadh
Al Hilal (KSA) 2 (Neves 45+3, Milinkovic-Savic 73)
Al Gharafa (Qat) 1 (Hassan 90+2)

East Region

League Stage

Sep 15 – Kashima
Kashima Antlers (Jpn) 7 (Cavric 11, 16, 42, Delianov 19 og, Tokuda 40, 56, Tagawa 73)
Newcastle Jets (Aus) 1 (Wood 79)

Sep 15 – Daejeon
Daejeon Hana Citizen (Kor) 1 (Bobsin 78)
Kyoto Sanga (Jpn) 0

Sep 15 – Suita
Gamba Osaka (Jpn) 4 (Usami 29, 67, Toshida 58, Sumi 90+3)
Cong An Hanoi (Vie) 1 (Perea 79)

Sep 15 – Ratchaburi
Ratchaburi (Tha) 4 (Rakotoharimalala 71, 84, 90+5, Ekanit 90+6)
Shanghai Port (Chn) 6 (Ampem 31, 36, 45+1, Wu Lei 51, Grau 86, Leonardo 90+7)

Sep 15 – Iskandar Puteri
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 1 (Arribas 26)
Buriram United (Tha) 1 (Schimmer 43)

Sep 15 – Beijing
Beijing Guoan (Chn) 3 (Akolo 2, Zhang Xizhe 12, Dudziak 46)
Pohang Steelers (Kor) 1 (Tranziska 6 pen)

Sep 16 – Jeonju
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor) 2 (T. Orobo 48, Italo 69)
Kashiwa Reysol (Jpn) 1 (Yuba 30)

Sep 16 – Pathum Thani
Port (Tha) 1 (Komatsu 45+4 og)
Vissel Kobe (Jpn) 2 (Komatsu 10, Muto 61)

World Service

2026-27 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TWO

West Region

League Stage

Group A

Sep 16:
Al Wahda (UAE) 3-2 Al Kuwait (Kuw);
Al Khaldiya (Bhr) 0-0 Nasaf (Uzb)

Group B

Sep 15:
Gol Gohar (Irn) 0-0 Al Jazira (UAE);
Arkadag (Tkm) 1-0 Al Muharraq (Bhr)

Group C

Sep 16:
Al Nahda (Oma) 1-1 Al Taawoun (KSA);
Al Rayyan (Qat) 4-3 Al Faisaly (Jor)

Group D

Sep 16:
Al Hussein (Jor) 2-2 East Bengal (Ind);
Al Shorta (Irq) 1-0 Al Seeb (Oma)

East Region

League Stage

Group E

Sep 16:
FC Seoul (Kor) 0-1 Persib Bandung (Idn);
The Cong–Viettel (Vie) 1-1 Melbourne Victory (Aus)

Group F

Sep 17:
Lion City Sailors (Sgp) 1-1 BG Pathum United (Tha); Adelaide United (Aus) 3-0 Tai Po (Hkg)

Group G

Sep 17:
Machida Zelvia (Jpn) 2-0 Preah Khan Reach Svay Rieng (Cam); Shanghai Shenhua (Chn) 2-1 Tampines Rovers (Sgp)

Group H

Sep 17:
Kitchee (Hkg) 0-0 Gangwon FC (Kor);
Phnom Penh Crown (Cam) 2-1 Kuching City (Mas)

2026-27 AFC CHALLENGE LEAGUE

East Region

Qualifying Play-Offs

Sep 15:
Kasuka (Bru) 2-1 Karketu Dili (Tls)

• *AFC Challenge League's October group stage results will feature in December's issue*

Final Table 2026

GUAM

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Wings (C)	6	5	1	0	38	10	16
Rovers	6	4	2	0	55	11	14
The Strykers	6	4	1	1	33	11	13
Quality Distributors	6	3	0	3	15	33	9
Southern Heat Omega	6	1	1	4	16	30	4
Sidekicks	6	1	1	4	9	25	4
Southern Cobras	6	0	0	6	3	49	0

AFRICA

2026-27 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

First Round Qualifying – 1st Leg

Sep 4:
Asswehly (Lby) 1-0 KVZ FC (Zan);
AS Port (Dji) 1-2 Zamalek (Egy);
JS Saoura (Alg) 1-0 Horoya (Gui)

Sep 5:
Mangasport (Gab) 3-1 African Stars (Nam);
CFFA (Mad) 2-0 Lijabatho (Les);
Gaborone United (Bot) 1-1 Young Africans (Tan);
El Merriekh Bentiu (Ssd) 1-0 Heegan (Som);
Aiglons (Cha) 0-0 Sidama (Eth);
Aigle Noir (Bdi) 0-2 Al Hilal (Sud);
Star Sport Academy (Sle) 0-0 Medina United (Gam);
Canchungo (Gnb) 0-1 Teungueth (Sen);
San Pedro (Civ) 1-1 Rivers United (Nga);
Vipers (Uga) 1-1 Nouadhibou (Mtn);
Al Merrikh (Sud) 1-0 Power Dynamos (Zam);
Club Africain (Tun) 1-0 Djoliba (Mli)

Sep 6:
Wiliete (Ang) 4–0 Foresters (Sey);
Scottland (Zim) 1–0 Nsingizini Hotspurs (Swz);
UD Songo (Moz) 0-1 Petro Atletico (Ang);
La Cure Waves (Mri) 0-0 Orlando Pirates (RSA);
Mighty Wanderers (Mwi) 0-1 Simba (Tan);
Aigles du Congo (Cod) 1-0 APR (Rwa);
Gor Mahia (Ken) 0-2 Pyramids (Egy);
Maghreb Fez (Mar) 4-1 Rahimo (Bfa);
ASC Kara (Tgo) 1-1 ASEC Mimosas (Civ);
Colombe Sportive (Cmr) 0-0 Stade Malien (Mli);
Rangers (Nga) 1-1 Sobemap (Ben);
ASN Nigelec (Nig) 0-0 MC Alger (Alg);
Medeama (Gha) 0-1 TP Mazembe (Cod)

Sep 11:
15 de Agosto (Eqg) 4-0 Fomboni (Com)

First Round Qualifying – 2nd Leg

Sep 10:
Foresters (Sey) 0-1 Wiliete (Ang) (agg 0-5)

Sep 11:
APR (Rwa) 3-0 Aigles du Congo (Cod) (agg 3-1);
Sobemap (Ben) 1-1 Rangers (Nga) (agg 2-2, *Rangers win 5-4 on pens*)

Sep 12:
Nsingizini Hotspurs (Swz) 0-0 Scottland (Zim) (agg 0-1);
Petro Atletico (Ang) 2-2 UD Songo (Moz) (agg 3-2);
African Stars (Nam) 2-0 Mangasport (Gab) (agg 3-3, *African Stars win on away goals*);
Orlando Pirates (RSA) 3-1 La Cure Waves (Mri) (agg 3-1);
Lijabatho (Les) 1-1 CFFA (Mad) (agg 1-3);
Young Africans (Tan) 2-1 Gaborone United (Bot) (agg 3-2);
Zamalek (Egy) 4-0 AS Port (Dji) (agg 6-1);
Heegan (Som) 0-3 El Merriekh Bentiu (Ssd) (agg 0-4);
Al Hilal (Sud) 1-0 Aigle Noir (Bdi) (agg 3-0);
Medina United (Gam) 1-1 Star Sport Academy (Sle) (agg 1-1, *Star Sport Academy win on away goals*);
Rahimo (Bfa) 0-0 Maghreb Fez (Mar) (agg 1-4);
Stade Malien (Mli) 0-0 Colombe Sportive (Cmr) (agg 0-0, *Colombe Sportive win 4-3 on pens*);
MC Alger (Alg) 5-0 ASN Nigelec (Nig) (agg 5-0);
Power Dynamos (Zam) 0-1 Al Merrikh (Sud) (agg 0-2);
TP Mazembe (Cod) 3-1 Medeama (Gha) (agg 4-1);
Djoliba (Mli) 2-2 Club Africain (Tun) (agg 2-3)

Sep 13:
Simba (Tan) 6-1 Mighty Wanderers (Mwi) (agg 7-1);
KVZ FC (Zan) 0-3 Asswehly (Lby) (agg 0-4);
Pyramids (Egy) 5-1 Gor Mahia (Ken) (agg 7-1);
Sidama (Eth) 3-0 Aiglons (Cha) (agg 3-0);
ASEC Mimosas (Civ) 2-1 ASC Kara (Tgo) (agg 3-2);
Teungueth (Sen) 1-0 Canchungo (Gnb) (agg 2-0);
Rivers United (Nga) 2-2 San Pedro (Civ) (agg 3-3, *Rivers United win on away goals*);
Nouadhibou (Mtn) 0-0 Vipers (Uga) (agg 1-1, *Nouadhibou win on away goals*);
Horoya (Gui) 3-1 JS Saoura (Alg) (agg 3-2)

Oct 3:
Fomboni (Com) 0-1 15 de Agosto (Eqg) (agg 0-5)

2026-27 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

First Round Qualifying – 1st Leg

Sep 4:
Hilal Alsahil (Sud) 2-1 Welwalo Adigrat (Eth);
AS PSI (Cha) 2-2 CO Korhogo (Civ);
ES Zarzis (Tun) 3-1 Diambars (Sen);
Panthere Sportive (Cmr) 1-1 Rayon Sports (Rwa)

Sep 5:
KMKM (Zan) 0-3 Al Ahli Tripoli (Lby);
AS Douanes (Mtn) 2-2 Hafia (Gui);
Shooting Stars (Nga) 1-0 CS Sfaxien (Tun);
Diarra (Mli) 1-0 Nations (Gha);
AS ZAM (Nig) 0-5 ASKO Kara (Tgo);
UNAM (Nam) 0-2 Kabuscorp (Ang);
Red Arrows (Zam) 2-0 Rouge (Mad);
Durban City (RSA) 1-0 Rukinzo (Bdi);
Atomic Ngome (Com) 0-1 Black Bulls (Moz);
Green Mamba (Swz) 0-2 Primeiro de Agosto (Ang)

Sep 6:
Mogadishu City (Som) 1-2 Kitara (Uga);
ZED (Egy) 4-0 ASAS Djibouti Telecom (Dji);
Al Ahli Madani (Sud) 2-2 Tusker (Ken);
Al Ghazal (Ssd) 1-7 Singida Black Stars (Tan);
El-Kanemi Warriors (Nga) 3-0 UD Internacional (Gnb);
AFAD Djekanou (Civ) 1-1 East End Lions (Sle);
Vitesse (Bfa) 1-2 Real Bamako (Mli);
AS Port-Louis (Mri) 1-1 Jwaneng Galaxy (Bot)

Sep 10:
The Panthers (Eqg) 1-3 ASPAC (Ben)

First Round Qualifying – 2nd Leg

Sep 11:
Real Bamako (Mli) 0-0 Vitesse (Bfa) (agg 2-1);
Primeiro de Agosto (Ang) 2-0 Green Mamba (Swz) (agg 4-0)

Sep 12:
Kitara (Uga) 2-0 Mogadishu City (Som) (agg 4-1);
ASAS Djibouti Telecom (Dji) 1-1 ZED (Egy) (agg 1-5);
Welwalo Adigrat (Eth) 2-1 Hilal Alsahil (Sud) (agg 3-3, *Welwalo Adigrat win 4-1 on pens*);
Al Ahli Tripoli (Lby) 4-0 KMKM (Zan) (agg 7-0);
Tusker (Ken) 1-0 Al Ahli Madani (Sud) (agg 3-2);
East End Lions (Sle) 2-2 AFAD Djekanou (Civ) (agg 3-3, *AFAD Djekanou win on away goals*);
Diambars (Sen) 1-0 ES Zarzis (Tun) (agg 2-3);
Rouge (Mad) 0-2 Red Arrows (Zam) (agg 0-4);
Jwaneng Galaxy (Bot) 0-1 AS Port-Louis (Mri) (agg 1-2);
Rayon Sports (Rwa) 0-0 Panthere Sportive (Cmr) (agg 1-1, *Rayon Sports win on away goals*);
Black Bulls (Moz) 0-0 Atomic Ngome (Com) (agg 1-0)

Sep 13:
Singida Black Stars (Tan) 3-0 Al Ghazal (Ssd) (agg 10-1);
CO Korhogo (Civ) 2-0 AS PSI (Cha) (agg 4-2);
UD Internacional (Gnb) 1-0 El-Kanemi Warriors (Nga) (agg 1-3);
CS Sfaxien (Tun) 2-0 Shooting Stars (Nga) (agg 2-1);
Nations (Gha) 1-1 Diarra (Mli) (agg 2-1);
ASKO Kara (Tgo) 1-0 AS ZAM (Nig) (agg 6-0);
Kabuscorp (Ang) 3-1 UNAM (Nam) (agg 5-1);
Rukinzo (Bdi) 1-2 Durban City (RSA) (agg 1-3);
Bazar Brothers (Sey) 0-1 DC Virunga (Cod)

Sep 16:
ASPAC (Ben) 2-4 The Panthers (Eqg) (agg 5-5, *The Panthers win on away goals*)

Sep 19:
Hafia (Gui) 0-1 AS Douanes (Mtn) (agg 2-3)

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Milan Jovanovic

Germany v Serbia

2010 World Cup group stage, Port Elizabeth, South Africa

The former Serbia, Standard Liege and Liverpool winger looks back on one of his country's most finest footballing moments: not only their first-ever victory over Germany, but also their first-ever World Cup finals victory as an independent nation

Match-winner... Jovanovic celebrates scoring v Germany

After a strong qualifying campaign, where we finished first in our group ahead of France, Austria and Romania, we went to that World Cup with big ambitions and high expectations. We had a really quality team and, with the late Radomir Antic, we also had a top national team coach.

The draw was okay. We were placed in a group with Germany, Ghana and Australia and we were convinced that we would advance to the knockouts.

However, we lost the first game against Ghana 1-0, so the second match against Germany was tricky; defeat would almost certainly mean elimination for us.

Of course we were disappointed after the defeat to Ghana, but we were confident that we would get the results that would take us to the next stage.

Germany had a strong team with top players like Miroslav Klose, Philipp Lahm, Thomas Muller, Manuel Neuer, Bastian Schweinsteiger and Mesut Ozil. They seemed in good shape – they beat Australia 4-0 in their first group game – so they were favourites, no doubt.

But we very organised, we defended well, and we were ready to attack and create chances. One such attack resulted in the only goal.

It's been 16 years, but I remember everything as if it happened yesterday.

Zdravko Kuzmanovic played a fine pass out to the right flank. Our right-winger, Milos Krasic, won a duel against the defender and sent a cross to the far post. There was Nikola Zigic, who was marked by two players, but he managed to head the ball to me. I controlled the ball with my chest and scored from close range. Neuer rushed out of his goal, but I put the ball past him.

After the game, people talked more about my goal celebration than the goal itself. While I was running towards our fans, I jumped over two advertising boards – only then did I notice that there was a moat, but it was too late to stop. So I jumped down into the moat and then celebrated with the supporters.

In the second half, Germany put us under pressure, even though they played with ten men after Klose was sent off.

Our goalkeeper Vladimir Stojkovic saved a penalty from Lukas Podolski, both teams had chances to score, but eventually we celebrated a massive victory.

I had better games during my career, both with the national team and with my clubs. But that win over Germany and my goal have historic significance, as it was the first goal and the first victory for our national team – under the name Serbia – at a World Cup.

> "I jumped over two advertising boards – only then did I notice that there was a moat"

Bundled in... Jovanovic finishes past Manuel Neuer

A draw against Australia would have been enough for us to go through. We totally outplayed them in the first half, but we lost 2-1 and were eliminated.

Interview by Vladimir Novak

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE NOVEMBER 20

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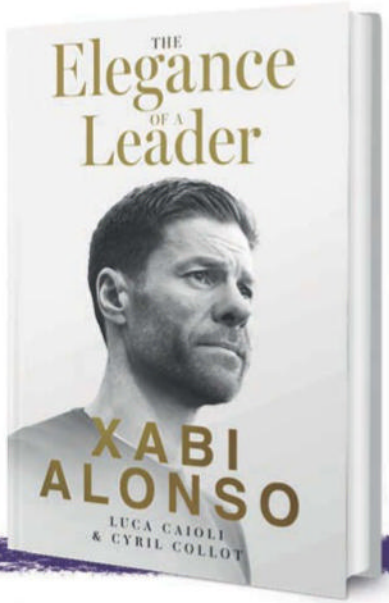

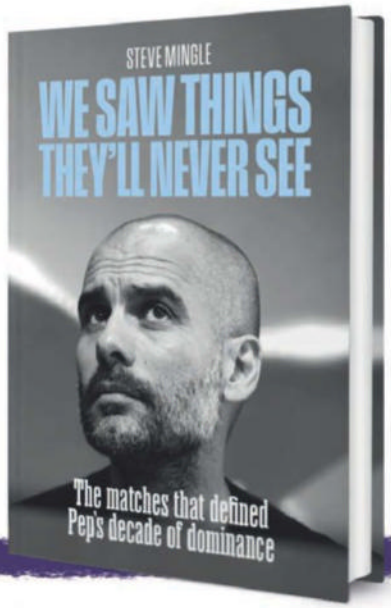

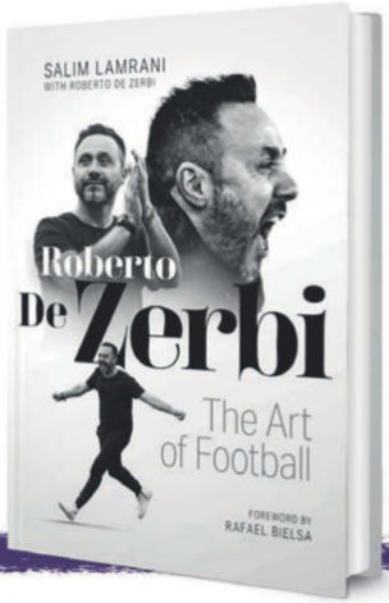

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